

Testimony before the Ohio Senate Finance Committee
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Chairman Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson and members of the Committee, I want to thank you and your colleagues in the General Assembly for your support of transit funding in House Bill 54. These funds are critical to ensuring that Ohio's public transit agencies continue to advance economic opportunity and provide essential services throughout our great state.

I want to express COTA's concerns with two current amendments in Amd. Sub. House Bill 96 that would negatively impact our ability to provide essential transportation services to the Central Ohio region.

The first amendment is regarding school transportation and public transit. The proposed amendment cannot be implemented as written for several reasons, but I'd like to focus on two:

1. The Federal Transit Administration bars mass transit from providing "yellow bus" service to and from school for students. Ohio transit systems would not only open ourselves up to lawsuits but also stand to lose significant federal funding if forced to implement "yellow bus" service.
2. Mass transit agencies are legally prohibited from refusing service to individuals, including children. As written, the language could require transit agencies to deny service if they are unable to provide one-seat rides for students (which is also illegal), causing potential civil rights challenges and legal liability.

We also have concerns the amendment could affect our successful educational pass program. This program provides discounted passes to 9-12 graders along with college and university students if their schools have enrolled in the program. These passes allow students to ride COTA to school, but also to jobs, internships and extracurricular activities. In 2024, our educational pass program saw just over 1 million rides. Should the language stay as is, we believe it could prohibit schools from enrolling and thus deny greater transportation access to their students.

I'd also like to discuss the amendment redefining "public use" as it relates to eminent domain. COTA understands the impetus behind this amendment, but we have great



concerns that as written, the amendment would significantly inhibit our ability to build out our plan for the bus rapid transit (BRT) system and supporting infrastructure that was overwhelmingly approved by Central Ohio voters this past fall.

Regional transit authorities judiciously use our power of eminent domain as granted in the Ohio Revised Code to ensure our systems are safe, efficient and provide daily access to jobs, healthcare and education for our customers.

We have met with the Ohio Farm Bureau and look forward to continuing to work with them on a legislative solution allowing regional transit authorities to conduct our missions as planned and continue to provide essential service throughout our state.

