



## **Ohio Senate Transportation Committee**

**John Ravasio, Chief of Staff, SORTA**

March 4, 2025

Chairman Patton, Vice Chair Schaeffer, Ranking Member Antonio and members of the Senate Transportation Committee:

- Investing in better public transportation improves economies, supports communities, and changes lives.
- In 2020, voters in Hamilton County in Southwest Ohio put their trust in us and passed a levy to improve our public transit system despite being in the midst of a global pandemic.
- The team at Cincinnati Metro has been hard at work delivering on the promise of that levy by dramatically improving the service to our community; adding 24-hour bus routes for the first time in our history, adding cross-town bus service routes for shorter trip times, increasing the frequency of bus arrivals, and a whole host of other customer-oriented improvements - so that no matter what shift you work you now have greater access to better paying jobs. Parents can get their children to medical appointments. Senior citizens can have access to quality-of-life services. And students have robust options to get to and from class.
- We are not done yet, but so far, because of these improvements an additional 93,000 jobs in Hamilton County are now accessible by public transportation; that's 740 more employers representing \$850M in wages that are now accessible by our region's public transit network.
- And without a doubt, the improvements are working. Ridership has grown steadily over the last three years and Cincinnati is one of the nation's leaders in post-pandemic ridership recovery. In the last quarter of 2024, the national average for post-pandemic ridership recovery was around 74%, while Cincinnati Metro's ridership was around 114% of pre-pandemic levels.
- When we provide good, frequent, reliable bus service to areas with jobs, services, healthcare, and education, ridership grows and everyone in our community and in our state benefits from this increased mobility and economic activity.

## **Supporting Transit Budget**

- As has been noted by the Ohio Public Transit Association, the 2023 State of Poverty in Ohio report stated Ohio only spends \$6 per capita on public transportation, one-tenth the national average. Of Ohio's 88 counties, 20% have very limited or no public transit whatsoever.
- The business community in Ohio has been unified in its support of public transportation as a means to improve the mobility of our state's workforce and improve economic outcomes.
- We join our transit and business partners in urging the Ohio House and Senate to support funding included in the DeWine Administration's budget which maintains the funding that was allocated in the previous budget for FY 24-25.
- Additionally, we urge the Ohio House and Senate to support funding for the Ohio Workforce Mobility Partnership Program.
- Funding from the state is absolutely critical for transit agencies like Cincinnati Metro to match and leverage federal funds that are used to replace buses, repair facilities, install shelters and benches, and support the network that supports our region's workforce.

## **Operator Safety**

- Finally, we strongly support any efforts to further protect our transit workers. We support stiffer penalties for those who choose to assault a transit worker in the line of duty.
- In 2023, I sat across from four Metro bus operators who were assaulted while on duty— some suffering career-ending injuries.
- As I listened to their heart-breaking stories and tried to understand their pain the solution was clear that it would take an “all of the above” approach.
- Our operators are public servants – they are also moms, dads, uncles, aunts, friends, and neighbors, who drive a bus through all conditions, day and night, and help our customers get to their destinations safely. Our operators are exposed to whomever decides to board their bus with no buffer, no lobby, no storefront, no physical co-worker to reach for in the time of need. We have a responsibility to them to use every tool at our disposal to protect them.
- We realize that community violence is a complicated issue, so we should leverage every tool in the tool kit – physical changes like barriers and panic buttons on the bus, de-escalation training, legislative support (that's where you all come in) and much more.
- One takeaway I'd like to share from the meeting with the operators who had suffered assaults – every single one of them expressed how much they loved their jobs, how they loved being able to help their customers and their community, and how they worked in service of others.
- Please help us where you can by ensuring that the law recognizes the special role transit workers play in our communities.

- Before closing, I want to add my concern with language added in the House-passed version of the bill that requires transit agencies to contract with law enforcement agencies to locate officers at hubs where more than six bus lines come together. We recognize and understand the concerns behind this amendment. However, this language is vague – not stating when the police presence is required. It is overly broad, there are hundreds of bus in Ohio that meet this criterion, but experience no problems. And it is duplicative, my agency and others already contract with police to provide coverage at certain busy hubs at peak service times. We join our colleagues at the Ohio Public Transit Association in respectfully requesting that this amendment be removed.
- Thank you for all that you do in support of our transit systems, our communities, our economies, and the citizens of Ohio.

Thank you!