



**Testimony before the Ohio House Finance Committee**  
**Aslyne Rodriguez, Director of Government Affairs, Central Ohio Transit Authority**  
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Chair Oelslager, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Crawley, and members of the House Finance Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on House Bill 74, the Fiscal Year 2022/2023 transportation budget. My name is Aslyne Rodriguez, and I serve as the Director of Government Affairs of the Central Ohio Transit Authority (COTA), the leading mobility provider for the Central Ohio region. COTA is proud to serve the region for nearly 50 years and provided more than 19 million passenger trips in 2019, the highest ridership in 31 years.

COTA's value to Central Ohio has been tested *and* proven during the COVID-19 pandemic, delivering thousands of customers to their essential jobs, food sources, education, social services, health care needs or to care for others. At the heart of COTA are our nearly 900 frontline heroes – most of them world-class trained operators – who keep COTA operating every day. Since March, our transit Operators and Vehicle Maintenance Technicians have worked more than 1.4 million hours.



Even during a pandemic, COTA made advances in 2020 to improve transit equity in neighborhoods by launching the nation's first bus on-demand zone, launching two additional transit on-demand microtransit zones, supporting wifi access and connectivity, and providing predictive analytics to prevent accidents.

Just two short years ago this General Assembly saw the need to invest in public transit as part of a comprehensive economic growth strategy. You were right then, and we must continue forward today. It is imperative that we restore the funding that you approved in the last budget of \$70M per fiscal year in public transit funding.

We recognize that Central Ohio and the Columbus Region are in a period of great change with an estimated one million more people moving to Central Ohio by 2050. Now is the time to show our Ohio citizens and those we wish to attract that we care about their mobility freedom, the ability to have quality choices on how to move about in their communities.

We also recognize the future of mobility is connected infrastructure and data. Vehicles, roads and people are beginning to communicate, creating efficiencies we can hardly conceive of today. Any future funding models must recognize the connectivity of the future if our transportation infrastructure is to be sustainable, encourage future economic development, embrace the innovation economy and increase quality of life. Ohio's transit



systems generate \$3.6 billion in economic activity and create and support 180,000 private sector jobs. A \$185 million dollar investment by the state will be a terrific return on investment and allow us to do much more.

As the pandemic took hold in 2020, OBM instituted across the board agency budget cuts of 20%, reducing the appropriations level to \$54M. The introduced version of budget for SFY 22-23 slashed public transit funding by 90% to only \$7.3M per year. Public transit is disproportionately relied upon by lower income “essential workers” – grocery and pharmacy store clerks, restaurant workers, construction trades, warehouse and fulfillment centers. Minority populations make up more than 61% of our ridership. Also during the pandemic, transit authorities across the state continue to provide essential services to seniors, veterans, and the developmentally disabled populations – providing transport to vital healthcare appointments and access to other essential human needs.

Governor DeWine’s COVID-19 Minority Health Strikeforce Report (August, 2020) and the Administration’s more comprehensive “Ohio’s Executive Response: A Plan of Action to Advance Equity (August, 2020) both identified public transit as a top impediment to access to healthcare services and to workforce participation and economic mobility. Federal money appropriated through the CARES Act was provided to public transit to deal specifically with



COVID related costs – specifically suspending fair collection during the pandemic, multiple daily deep cleanings of vehicles, procurement of PPE and other vital services to keep our authority safe and secure. When introducing the budget, the Governor said the State of Ohio should NOT budget based on one-time federal resources. Ohio’s transit systems should also not budget based on one-time federal money – that is to be used for pandemic related costs. While the pandemic is not entirely behind us, Ohio must look ahead to the continued post-pandemic economic recovery. This is the budget that will be in place through June 30<sup>th</sup> of 2023. We know that through the lens of economic recovery, public transit is a critically factor in eliminating barriers to workforce participation.

The Ohio General Assembly has continued to invest significant amounts in workforce development, as a means of providing Ohioans access to upward economic mobility and less reliance on government safety net programs. However, investing in short-term certificates or workforce credentials without also addressing some of the more direct barriers to workforce participation (transportation, benefit cliff issues related to childcare, etc.) will cause these investments to fall short of their intended return for Ohio families. Ohio’s public transit authorities and the Ohio communities we serve – rural, suburban, and urban – are united in the realization that we have an important role to play in advancing economic opportunity and also providing essential services to our most vulnerable populations



(veterans, seniors, those with developmental disabilities). To do so – play an important role in Ohio’s economic economy and future prosperity, we know that we need to at least get back to where we were before the COVID-19 pandemic. The proposed funding levels for public transit fall well short of the necessary investment in the 61 transit organizations who provide vital services that support economic and workforce development, access to healthcare and education, and mobility to millions of Ohioans annually.

We are asking the Ohio House Finance Committee to restore transit funding to the previous pre-pandemic funding level of \$70M per year to allow us continuing to innovate and equitably support the mobility needs of the region’s diverse and growing communities. It has never been more important to be a champion for public transit to ensure equal access to jobs, healthcare and education.

