

TESTIMONY TO THE HOUSE FINANCE COMMITTEE

ON NEED FOR MORE INVESTMENT IN PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

Ohio House Representative Finance Chairman: Representative Scott Oelslager

Chairman and Members of the Committee - my name is Ben Capelle. I am the Vice President of the Ohio Public Transit Association and CEO of the Laketran, the Lake County Regional Transit Authority. I have worked in public transportation in Ohio for nearly 20 years at both smaller, rural agencies and mid-size, urban transit systems. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. As each of you are aware, the upcoming state budget for public transit is at considerable risk due to the challenges of 2020.

Public transit in Ohio is a \$900 million industry that supports many manufacturers, suppliers, and essential jobs.

Public transit gets workers to work, students to school, connects important destinations, drives economic development, and provides access to many Ohioans who have no other mobility option due to economic realities or disabilities.

In the proposed state budget, discretionary funding for public transportation was cut by 90% to just \$7.3 million.

The State of Ohio significantly underinvests in public transportation. Since I began my career in public transit, in the last two decades, the State's annual General Revenue investment declined from \$44 million to \$6.5 million. These cuts resulted in higher fares and cuts in bus service across the state.

A study by the Ohio Department of Transportation recognized the need for more investment in public transportation. And the last legislature made sure transit received the funding it needs.

Two years ago, the state historically allocated \$70 million annually for public transit. And now we need to retain that funding level.

Before the \$70 million investment in 2020:

- Ohio ranked 7th in population, but 41st in public transit funding.
- Ohio was investing \$0.63 per person, whereas neighboring states Pennsylvania and Michigan spent \$128.86 and \$26.78, respectively.

We do not need to move back to these numbers, we need to move Ohio forward.

The 20-21 historic \$70 million investment in public transit resulted in service expansions, fleet enhancements, and technology investments that improved safety and efficiency.

This is not about one community. Transit funding supports people and businesses everywhere in Ohio.

- Over 3 million Ohioans rely on public transportation every day
- State funding provided 115 million trips to get people to work, shopping and health care
- Transit funding made a difference in 135 different Ohio communities and 71 counties last year – rural communities, urban communities, and suburban communities.

State funding for transit supports vulnerable populations like our seniors and people with disabilities to guarantee they have access to get to work or critical doctor appointments.

In Lake County, state funds allowed Laketran to become a safety net for the community during the pandemic. We got essential workers to work. We provided access to lifesaving dialysis and COVID vaccines. And during the Stay at Home order we delivered groceries to low-income, homebound seniors.

These funds also help invest in the economic development – Laketran has been able to construct a transit center at our community college that would not have been possible without state investment. We are now improving access to affordable education and career training.

Your investment in transit is also allowing our industry to innovate. The transit center's infrastructure will allow Laketran to power Ohio's first fleet of zero-emissions, battery electric buses.

These projects move Ohio forward.

And if our outcomes alone don't convince you, I want you to know investing in transit is a good financial investment for the State of Ohio. Additional state funding results in additional federal funding when used as local match. The \$70 million in state GRF funding resulted in \$200 million in additional federal funding for our communities. There are few better returns for state government. And this is especially important for our rural transit systems, like when I worked in Clermont County, and we didn't have local match to leverage federal dollars.

The impact of this year's cut is severe for public transit. Just using Laketran as an example, in the last state budget, Laketran alone received \$6.3 million in funding which almost equates the entire state allocation planned for this upcoming budget. We are one of over 60 systems that rely on this funding.

In closing, Ohio has made significant investments in public transportation and that investment paid off.

- Ohio more than doubled its investment through federal funds
- Nearly every community benefited
- Jobs were maintained and agencies stepped up in Ohio's time of need – especially by getting essential workers to jobs.
- State funding also helped maintain nearly 8,000 transit jobs across the state – an important workforce for our local economies.

The Governor's recently introduced budget reduces transit funding to the lowest level we have seen in decades. These cuts will mean service reductions, layoffs, less innovation – it means moving Ohio backwards, instead of forward.

Lastly, I would like to remind all of you that public transit is not always what you think. I grew up here in Columbus, I went to Upper Arlington High School. I graduated from The Ohio State University, I have called Ohio home my whole life. I am 38 and generally in good health. In June of 2019, I was building my garage at my home in Willoughby, Ohio. I fell off a ladder and broke my leg pretty severely. I could not drive for 4 months. In an instant, my every day routine changed.

My sister, who lives 30 min away in Cleveland, took me to doctor appointments and helped me as much as she could, but she has a job and could not take me everywhere I needed to go. Luckily, I live in a community with access to good public transit and I rode the bus to get to work, to go shopping, and do pretty much anything else you can think of. Without public transit, I would have been a prisoner of my home.

The specific circumstances of my situation might be unique, but the overall theme and story are not. This type of situation happens every day in our great state. Maybe it is someone who has an accident, maybe a senior can no longer driver for any number of reasons, maybe a person has a disability that prevents driving. No matter what, it is public transit that is there to fill the gap.

Please help us by maintaining our previous levels of funding thereby allowing us to maintain our service levels as we come out of the COVID-19 pandemic and continue to move Ohio forward.

I welcome any questions and thank you for your time and attention.