

House Bill 74 Ohio Transportation Budget Impacts on Public Transportation

Testimony Given on February 17, 2021 by:

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Mr. Chairman, Vice Chair, and members of the committee—My Name is Kirt Conrad. I am the CEO of the Stark Area Regional Transit Authority in Canton, Ohio and a past president of the Ohio Public Transit Association. I have worked in public transportation in Ohio for over 25 years, and I one of the longest serving transit agency heads in Ohio. I am here today to raise concern about the proposed cut of 90% in the Governor's proposed budget.

First, I would like to address the issue of transit getting funding in the Cares act. Public transportation did get additional funding to keep service on the road. Because of this perceive windfall, public transportation is getting cut. The State received \$600 million in the first two bills and has passed some of that funding to local governments. It is highly likely states will get additional funding in the next stimulus package. Will the locals that received early funding, be cut like transit it here? Since this is one time federal money, will the \$70 million number be restored in the 2024 state budget?

We have used nearly half of the funding to date. This has allowed us to keep service on the streets without cutting service or cutting positions. With Covid, we have seen a reduction of riders; however, we cannot cut service because of social distancing requirements.

We are working with Wayne County to expand service in the largest County in the State with a population of about \$120,000 without public transportation. The state funding in the last budget helped restituting this service. At this point, we are working with employers such as Gojo and Smuckers to expand service. Without a clear funding source from the State, it highly likely this service will be cut.

SARTA did expand service because of funding received in the last budget. The new service was serving Gojo, Superior Meats, and Cintas. Basically, we took a risk that state funding would be there in the future. If funding is not restored, this could be cut.

Since 1974, the State of Ohio has been funding public transportation in some form. At the federal level, the transit trust fund receives federal gas tax. In Ohio, it is unconstitutional to spend gas tax money on public transportation. This dedicated funding source allows ODOT to plan transportation projects out 30 years in the future as required by federal law.

Because of a lack of clear dedicated funding, transit spending is set in the two year state budget. The volatility of funding, as demonstrated in this budget, does not allow a transit system to plan long term. Even in the program we have now, shorter term projects score well and long term ones score poorly. While this short term unpredictable program may technically comply with federal law, it does no satisfy the goal of long term funding stability and predictability.

All of the transits worked with ODOT in establishing the program, monitoring the projects, and selecting the criteria. In the last round of funding over \$200 million of requests were made for the \$70 million. This shows a huge unfunded short term need as only 30% of the requests were funded. The Office of Transit monitored the projects closer than they ever had before. However, none of the needs,

successes, or impacts seemed to impact ODOT and the administration's decision. They just arbitrarily rejected all the need and performance data gathered over the last two years.

I can remember testifying before this committee for the last budget saying the same the same things. ODOT's own public transportation needs study showed the state should be spending over \$150 million per year just to keep transit in Ohio in a state of good repair. In Stark County, we have not even restored Sunday service that was cut during the Great Recession in 2009. So, 11 years have passed and SARTA is worse off now.

We have increased demand placed on us to get people to work. Many transit systems are taking people to get the COVID vaccine. SARTA was helping deliver meals to senior citizens. If we as a state can spend \$50 million on advertising to people that do not even live here, we should be able to fund the mobility needs of our seniors and most at need in our community.

It seems like we have had the same conversation for years. For as long as I have been in Ohio transit, the problems always gets kicked down the road. As a state, we have never really, truly committed to world class public transportation. We would never let this happen to airports, highways, waterways, or ports. We can and must do better. People's lives depend on it. Thank you.

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