

TESTIMONY

**By Stu Nicholson
Executive Director
All Aboard Ohio**

**on
House Bill 74 – ODOT biennial budget
Feb. 25, 2021
Ohio House of Representatives
Finance Committee**

The Honorable Chairman Oelslager, thank you for the opportunity to share our comments on House Bill 74, the biennial budget bill for the Ohio Department of Transportation. All Aboard Ohio is a statewide nonprofit organization that has advocated for improved passenger rail and public transportation services in and through Ohio for nearly 50 years.

Those have been a frustrating five decades for our constituents. But two years ago, things seemed to be turning in the favor of the 1 million Ohioans without cars and many more families that must share a car or who simply want more choices than car dependency.

In 2019, we were grateful to see the Ohio General Assembly begin to provide meaningful dollars to public transit.

The \$70 million per year biennial budget outlay of 2019 was a good start toward addressing the needs of transit agencies and riders as identified in ODOT's 2015 Transit Needs Study. That study determined, with significant public input, that the State of Ohio should be committing \$185 million per year (by now) to transit so our citizens can get to work, school, medical appointments, shopping and other activities that improve themselves and their communities. Transit also connects a larger labor and customer pool to Ohio's new and expanding businesses.

No time is a good time to retreat from progress toward that goal, especially as we emerge and recover from this current pandemic.

We define progress as including the creation of a dedicated revenue stream within the ODOT budget that benefits public transportation. Only with your continued support of public transit can more of Ohio's citizens physically connect with their own hopes for a better life.

We are also hopeful about recent news regarding Amtrak's desire to expand service to Ohio, the nation's seventh-most populous state. Ohio needs more and better intercity trains as well as good public transit.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, if it wasn't for the economic strength of Ohio's six largest metro areas, the state would have lost 18,000 jobs over the past five years. Instead, it gained 227,000 jobs – all in our most populous areas. But much of small-town and rural Ohio has been left behind. A reason why is Ohio's lack of physical access to opportunities. A diverse transportation system can address that.

Amtrak's expansion plans **do not** involve asking Ohio to financially support the building or initiation of new services. But there **are** some things Ohio can do legislatively to better accommodate passenger rail planning activities and remove bureaucratic barriers to the growth of rail service in Ohio. We are grateful to Representatives Skindell and Upchurch for sponsoring several amendments that can do just that.

The amendments would allow the first new Ohio routes to be selected based on merit rather than a 35-year-old law left over from a state rail authority that doesn't exist anymore; allow Ohio to partner and coordinate with its neighboring Midwest states on information sharing and collaborative planning; and allow passenger rail capital projects to move forward with a one-step

approval from the Ohio Rail Development Commission while strengthening legislative oversight of the rail commission.

All Aboard Ohio believes that these legislative refinements are common-sense actions that can improve Ohio's chances of catching up to its neighboring states when it comes to public transportation and passenger rail services. We hope that you concur.

Thank you again for giving us this opportunity to share our comments.

END