



**Testimony before the Ohio Senate Transportation Committee**  
**Aslyne Rodriguez, Director of Government Affairs, Central Ohio Transit Authority**  
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Chair Kunze, Vice Chair Reineke, Ranking Member Antonio, and members of the House Transportation 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 2020, 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.

Thanks to Ohio Transit Partnership Program (OTP2) funding awarded by the State we have been able to launch innovative and critical services like our COTA//Plus and our Accessible Healthcare Initiative. COTA//Plus provides first-last mile connections for customers, providing them with access to our transit system, or door-to-door access to their jobs, school, food source or doctor's appointments. COTA//Plus Grove City expanded service in





September 2020 to include the entire community and also began providing service to senior citizens when a local Senior Center ended their transportation program during the pandemic.

We are also now working with Southwestern City Schools to help them better understand how COTA//Plus can better serve students, especially those who need ADA access.

As we all know Ohio is experiencing an opiate crisis that is impacting all corners of life, leaving no household immune regardless of socioeconomic backgrounds. As a pillar in the community, COTA will offer a program for organizations, Recovery or Healthcare Centers supporting prenatal care, to obtain free, at no cost to the organization or customer, daily bus passes for those enrolled in the facility's treatment programs. Supported by state funding in Ohio, the goal is to assist the customer with transportation costs associated with their medical treatments, and counseling to empower them to recover from opioids. In addition, passes would be distributed to women currently receiving assistance for pregnancy, or new moms that are in low income areas and are receiving healthcare assistance but are in need of transportation to treatment.

Let's talk education, one of the biggest issues critical to our community is ensuring that students of the state's largest school district can return to the classroom. COTA is committed to working with our community leaders to connect people to prosperity and that includes



equitable access to education. Columbus City Schools now has 8,000 transit passes for all eighth grade and high school students through COTA's Student Discount Pass Program. Under the agreement, students will have COTA transit access through the end of the semester and throughout summer vacation. This is what it means to build a strong pipeline for economic mobility.

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.

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 fare 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).

Among our communities most vulnerable customers are Veterans who served our country and now depend on public transportation for their essential needs. The Department of Veteran's Affairs (VA) Central Ohio Health Care Systems, specifically its Community Outreach Division (COD), provides medical, housing and employment services to thousands of Veterans every year. It is estimated that 85% of these Veterans lack sufficient means of reliable transportation to enable them actively search, gain and maintain housing or employment. COTA provides an invaluable service for this Veteran demographic by providing low cost, variable routes and time schedules.



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 Senate Transportation Committee to restore transit funding to the previous pre-pandemic funding level of \$70M per year to allow us to continue 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.

