

TESTIMONY

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

**on
ODOT biennial budget
March 17, 2021
Ohio Senate
Transportation Committee**

Honorable Chair Kunze and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to share our comments on 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 Ohio for nearly 50 years.

These have been a frustrating five decades for our constituents...and yours.

Governor DeWine's announced transit funding cuts are beyond unacceptable. They will severely hurt our citizens and economy: pulling our state further down a sorry list comparing Ohio to what other states spend per capita on public transportation. Two years ago, we were 45th in the nation. We are barely higher than that today. Do we really want to travel backward?

Still, two years ago, things seemed to be favoring the 1 million Ohioans without cars and many more working families that share a car or who simply want more options to having to be burdened with the costs of driving to access a job, education, health care and more.

In 2019, we were grateful to see the Ohio General Assembly begin to provide meaningful dollars to public transit. We thank you for that.

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, statewide public input, that the State of Ohio should be committing \$185 million per year (by now) to invest in public transit. It is an investment in our citizens becoming better able to get to work, school, medical appointments, shopping and other activities that improve themselves and benefit their communities.

Let's also not ignore that transit 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 this goal, especially as we emerge and recover from this current pandemic.

But though we favor the House reversal of the Governor's and ODOT's recommend cuts, it is still not enough. It still fails to meet ODOT's own funding targets in the 2015 study. What better time to **invest** in urban, suburban and rural transit than right now? We can literally and figuratively put Ohio's economy and recovery on the bus, streetcar or train.

To that end, we call for the creation of a **transit-dedicated revenue stream** within the ODOT budget. These times demand bold action. At the very least, both the Ohio House and Senate should be exploring the same type of dedicated funding that highways have been afforded since the 1950's. If that takes a joint legislative panel, we favor that and are ready to work with you.

But in the meantime, we believe the Ohio Senate should take the bold step of approaching or reaching the \$185 million dollars per year funding levels that **our own citizens called for in 2015**. That funding may come from General Revenue or Federal "flex" funds or a combination of both, but it should and must be identified and dedicated.

Only with your greater support of public transit can more of Ohio's citizens physically connect with what they need and realize their own hopes for a better life.

Only such an investment sends a message to companies looking to expand or locate in Ohio that we have BOTH a ready-to-work and more mobile workforce.

All Aboard Ohio believes these are common-sense actions that will not only improve Ohio's chances of catching up to its neighboring states when it comes to public transportation. It will enable us to trigger an even larger economic recovery in a post-pandemic world.

We hope you concur. Ohioans are depending on you.

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

END