Chairman, members of the committee – my name is Kirt Conrad. I am the immediate past President of the Ohio Public Transit Association and CEO of the Stark Area Regional Transit Authority in Canton. I have worked in public transportation in Ohio for over 20 years. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding state’s proposed transportation budget. OPTA represents transit systems in 61 of Ohio’s 88 counties. Ohioans make 115 million trips by transit every year.

First, I would like to thank the committee for addressing sales tax loopholes and on line purchases. For the nine transit systems that have enacted local sales tax, this will help address the revenue loss from the MCO sales tax. For our system, we lost $1.2 million. For all systems the loss was over $40 million.

Second, I would like to request the Senate to restore the $6.5 million – fund #775451 in the bill. This line item funds fare assistance for elderly and disabled passengers. Most of the funding supports rural services that do not have the benefit of a dedicated local funding source. This is a 50% cut of what ODOT is planning to spend on this program for the SFY 2020.

The elderly and disable fare reduction program was started in 1975. Transit systems are required by the Federal Transit Administration to allow seniors and those with disabilities to ride for half fare. This program was intended for the state to reimburse transit systems the revenue they lost because of the federal mandate. All transit systems in the state received this funding including the large urban systems.

However, this program was limited only to the rural properties in cuts to transit in 2005. At one point, our agency was receiving nearly $500,000 from this program. Currently, we receive no fare assistance from the state.

While it is possible to back fill this elderly and disabled fare assistance with the increased funding included in the Transportation budget, this will impact additional systems.

In our case, we still have not been able to restore service we cut during the Great Recession. Stark County is the largest transit system that does not have Sunday service. We have identified an additional $5 million in service needs in our community. The $800 million expansion of the Football Hall of Fame Village will attract an estimated 10,000 visitors every day and a possible 1,000 employees that could need transported to the cite because of a lack parking. At this point, we do not have the resources to respond to this need.

Unlike other neighboring states that include dedicated funding steams for public transportation, public transit funding in Ohio has evolved county by county and community by community. Toledo has a property tax and Cincinnati gets part of the income tax. Others have a sales tax ranging from .25% to 1%. Some rural systems literally have bake sales to support transportation. The funding strategy has been to leverage contracts with Boards of Developmental Disabilities, Department of Job and Family Services, and Department of Aging to supplement state and federal programs. A policy change in any one of these programs at the state level could have the unintended and possibly devastating budget issues for a local transit system.

For example, a change in a rule at the Ohio Department of DD, will prevent day workshops and employment providers for DD clients to directly purchase bus passes and tickets from transit systems. In order to get reimbursement for tickets and passes from the state for DD clients, the transit system will need to become a certified Medicaid provider and create a file for each person. Then they will submit an invoice for that client to the state. Very few transit systems are certified Medicaid providers. For those transit systems that are not, I am not sure how DD clients will be able to use public transit.

Many times public transportation is the last thing thought of in planning new developments, getting people to work, or the doctor. If by magic, the bus will just show up and transport. This is the case with this funding cut. It might seem small, but to the transit systems that are required to transport disabled and elderly passengers, at half fare, the loss of this funding is like death by a 1,000 cuts.

Thank you for your consideration.