

Testimony before the Ohio Senate Transportation Committee Casey Blazer, External Relations Manager, Central Ohio Transit Authority

Chairwoman Kunze, Vice Chair Reineke, Ranking Member Antonio and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Casey Blazer, and I am the External Relations Manager at the Central Ohio Transit Authority, more commonly known as COTA.

COTA is the Columbus region's mobility solutions provider, driven each day to connect people to prosperity through innovation, dedication and teamwork. We serve a region of more than 1.4 million people and provide fixed-route, paratransit and micro transit service.

By utilizing technology and data, establishing community partnerships and applying sustainability principles, COTA provides access to jobs, healthcare and education.

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. Demographics are shifting, new technologies are on the horizon and the physical landscape is being remade as communities evolve. In recognition of the growth in our region and recent economic development announcements, we respectfully request that the transportation budget recognize public transit's pivotal role in serving Ohio's growing economy and maintain \$70 million in funding.

The public transit agencies of today are innovative and forward-thinking with mobility services including on-demand micro-transit, first and last mile solutions, bus rapid transit and regional connections. We utilize data, predictive analytics and artificial intelligence to put the best service out on the road. While customers might see buses as a mode of transportation, we see them as high-tech rolling "data centers" that help us learn more about passenger needs and provide a safer, more accessible customer experience.

Public transit is a tool for workforce development and economic mobility. As Ohio continues to attract historic investment to our state, with announcements like Intel, Ford, and Honda, we must ensure our public transit providers are adequately funded to meet the needs of the growing workforce. We must



be able to connect workers not only to jobs, but all Ohioans to food, education, healthcare, and recreation.

One challenge we are facing regarding these workforce connections is that COTA is restricted in the use of our sales tax revenues within our designated service area. With many of these economic development announcements in more rural settings, like Intel in Licking County, we need to develop creative and seamless solutions to meet the workforce transportation demands. This is why we are supportive of the amendment creating the Regional Workforce Mobility Partnership Program, with \$15 million per fiscal year to address these transit gaps. This amendment will provide a dedicated source of funds for rural and large urban transit systems to proactively collaborate on workforce transportation to support growing job centers and economic development investments.

I will close in saying that Ohio's public transit authorities and the 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 (including veterans, seniors and those with developmental disabilities). We respectfully ask to maintain \$70 million in transit funding and for the establishment of the \$30 million-dollar Regional Workforce Mobility Partnership Program.

Thank you for your time. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.

