

Testimony for HB 23

By

Kirt Conrad, CEO

Stark Area Regional Transit Authority, Canton, Ohio

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Chairwoman, members of the Committee, my name is Kirt Conrad, CEO of the Stark Area Regional Transit Authority (SARTA) in Canton. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the state transportation budget. I have worked in public transit in Ohio since 1996, and I am the longest serving current transit director in the state. The increase in state funding in the last two transportation budgets have allowed us to respond to changes in our community and the pandemic. Currently, we have most employees ever and our ridership on our paratransit service is at record highs. Our fixed route ridership is recovering; however, some changes in employment patterns have moved demand.

In March, Amazon will be opening a new distribution center employing over 1,000 people. The Football Hall of Fame Village is opening and is projected to employ over 1,000 people with thousands of visitors a day. Tractor Supply is opening a new distribution center with 500 jobs in Massillon. We are working with these employers to modify routes to better serve their needs.

Because of the increased state support, we were able to extend transit service into Wooster and Wayne County. We have been working with Wayne County for over ten years to find a way to provide transit service. The County with a population of over 120,000 people was the largest county in Ohio without public transportation. Last January, service started with about 200 trips per month. This January, we transported over 1,500 trips. We are looking at adding fixed route service in Wooster and trips to the VA hospital in Cleveland. This would not have been possible without state support.

SARTA used last year's grants to support covid trips, expand out training facilities, and add early morning service. We have expanded our hydrogen and compressed natural gas fueling stations. SARTA has the third largest hydrogen fuel cell fleet in the country. Because of the State's support, we will be retiring our last diesel buses by the end of next year. All of our fleet will either be zero emission or CNG vehicles. This was funded in part by ODOT flex funds, state-controlled Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ), and the Ohio EPA Diesel Emissions Reduction Grant (DERG).

We just completed a community survey of community leaders that revealed there are still unmet mobility needs in our community. Employers need earlier morning and later night service. Route frequency and coverage is limited outside of Canton, Alliance, and Massillon. The most significant mobility need is there is no transit service on Sunday. Without the funding proposed in this budget, we would not be able to provide the current level of transit service. While additional funding could be used, I am asking this committee to support the proposed funding level for public transportation. Thank you.

Kirt Conrad, CEO

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