



Transit Agencies Ask Lawmakers to Restore Funding in Transportation Budget

Transit agencies told lawmakers that they may have to cut routes and stop investing in new and innovative services for Ohioans if the executive budget recommendation for transit remains the same. They are a part of HB74 (Oelslager).

Transit saw a spike in funding in the last biennium as lawmakers dedicated about \$70 million in each fiscal year under 133-HB62 (Oelslager), although the pandemic reduced the amount that went to the local agencies. Transit agencies also saw help from the federal government in federal stimulus bills last year, but they told members of the House Finance Committee Wednesday that those funds are not enough to plan around over the next two years.

"We just need some stability, some predictability from the state on our funding and having a 90 percent reduction from \$70 million to \$7 million is not that," said Kirt Conrad of the Stark Regional Transit Authority.

Rep. Mike Skindell (D-Lakewood) remarked to India Birdsong of the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority (RTA) that Columbus feels transit systems "are rolling in the money" because of the federal stimulus money they received and asked about the challenges the agency has faced. Birdsong called the funds they received from the CARES Act "an amazing asset" but said it has guidelines and can only be used for operations. It can't be "flexed" for other uses or be put toward capital projects. Instead, it has gone towards operations, including for disinfecting busses.

"We have utilized that COVID money to keep us afloat operationally," she said, adding that because of those funds, RTA is in a good position to stay in the black and not the red over the next two years. But she said ridership is down 50 to 55 percent. RTA is looking at ways to be creative in order to save money once those federal funds are spent.

Rep. Erica Crawley (D-Columbus) asked Aslyne Rodriguez of the Central Ohio Transit Authority (COTA) how it spent the extra funds it received in the last transportation budget. Rodriguez said some went to upgrading technology and the use of data to help predict where accidents might happen. It also allowed COTA to increase its capacity.

Crawley asked Rodriguez how COTA would use the funds if the state makes a similar investment this biennium. Rodriguez said they have been investing more in regionalism and working with connections in nearby counties. She also noted the creation of a Rickenbacker mobility hub that in addition to transfers, will include food distribution, workforce development and health care. She noted Rickenbacker also is a hub for 28,000 jobs.

"This will allow us to be innovative in how we serve people and bring our service to them," she said.

Rep. Allison Russo (D-Columbus) asked how it would affect COTA funding if the executive proposal stays the same and funding levels drop. Rodriguez said that is a question they are asking themselves, and how can they be equitable in how they reduce services. It would pause engagement in COTA's connections with other counties, and any expansion would be paused.

"I don't have a 'this line would be cut,' or 'this service would stop,'" answer, she said, but instead COTA would have to look across the board to see what would be reduced.

Rep. Dan Troy (D-Willowick) posed a similar question to Ben Capelle of Laketrans, who noted that the transit agency in Lake County had expanded service with extra funds last biennium to a busy corridor with a number of manufacturers who needed help getting its workforce to their jobs. Capelle told Troy that it would be a difficult decision for the agency, having to decide if they are cutting access for a person going to a new job, or a senior going to a dialysis appointment.

Carrie Woody of Lancaster Public Transit System said small, rural agencies like hers in Ohio have to rely on revenue from contracted services, funds from local governments, or the sale of ads. Some rural transit agencies have even had to hold bake sales to raise enough local funds to draw down federal funds. She said that makes it difficult to do long range planning.

With the extra money in the last budget, Woody said they were able to change the way they do their services. Her agency had been able to only accept cash payments for fares, and some riders had to incur service charges from banks just to get cash to pay a \$2 fare. With the extra money in the last budget, the transit agency was able to get equipment allowing it to accept electronic fare payments. She noted that at least a dozen other rural agencies like hers were also in the same situation before those funds allowed them to move to electronic payments.

"Can you imagine? Over 13 of us were cash only services in 2020," she said.

The transit agencies also received support from Jason Warner of the Greater Ohio Policy Center, who called it "disheartening" that the executive proposal cut \$125 million in state dollars from transit in the upcoming biennium. He told the committee that funding from COVID relief "should not be used as a replacement."

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