

Wednesday, February 17, 2021

Transit Agencies Call For Additional Funding

Public transit agencies from across the state on Wednesday railed against a proposed cut in funding in the state's two-year transportation budget.

The state's current two-year transportation spending outline made \$70 million available to public transit in each year of the biennium.

But Gov. Mike DeWine's latest \$8.19 billion proposal (HB 74) reduces that figure by almost 90%. (Department of Transportation Redbook)

Aslyne Rodriguez, director of government affairs at the Central Ohio Transit Authority, told members of the House Finance TrackCommittee that public transit systems generate \$3.6 billion in economic activity and create and support 180,000 private sector jobs.

She called on lawmakers to make a \$185 million investment in public transportation over the biennium, noting that transit agencies disproportionately serve essential workers who have been on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ms. Rodriguez acknowledged that transit agencies received an infusion of federal money due to the pandemic, but told the panel that money was used to address costs related to the public health crisis.

"When introducing the budget, the governor said the state of Ohio should not budget based on one-time federal resources," she said. "Ohio's transit systems should also not budget based on one-time federal money – that is to be used for pandemic related costs. While the pandemic is not entirely behind us, Ohio must look ahead to the continued post-pandemic economic recovery."

Rep. Erica Crawley (D-Columbus) asked how much money the transit authority received from the federal government.

Ms. Rodriguez said the total was \$48 million, all of which was spent in 2020 for the purposes of suspending fares, keeping people employed, deploying more vehicles to allow riders to maintain social distance and cleaning.

Ben Capelle, vice president of the Ohio Public Transit Association and CEO of Laketran, said the state has historically underfunded public transit.

"Since I began my career in public transit, in the last two decades, the state's annual general

revenue investment declined from \$44 million to \$6.5 million," he said. "These cuts resulted in higher fares and cuts in bus service across the state."

In response to a question from Rep. Crawley about revenue loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Mr. Capelle pegged the figure at about \$2.5 million, and added the transit agency incurred additional expenses to take measure to mitigate the spread of the virus.

India Birdsong, CEO and general manager of the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority, called the governor's proposal to fund public transit at \$7.3 million in each year of the biennium "a giant step backwards."

Following a question from Rep. Michael Skindell (D-Lakewood), Ms. Birdsong explained that the GCRTA received about \$111.8 million in federal funding last year but added that money came with restrictions.

"It's not available to use to use on capital projects," she said.

Asked by Rep. Phil Plummer (R-Dayton) if fares were waived during the public health crisis, Ms. Birdsong said they were not, and pointed to safety concerns as the reason not to do so.

"Because of that, we didn't have very many issues security-wise," she said.

Carrie Woody, director of Lancaster-Fairfield Public Transit, said that the current budget allowed her agency to implement a commuter service along the U.S. 33 corridor and an electronic fare payment system.

She, too, explained that the infusion of federal funding was a lifeline.

"Had it not been for the CARES Act funding to replace our local revenues, we would have folded," she said. "There was no way for us to make up the loss of our local funds, and no way to cover the added expenses to keep our workers and passengers safe."

Claudia Amrhein, president of the Ohio Public Transit Association and general manager and CEO of Portage Area Regional Transportation Authority, called stable and predictable revenue "critical" for public transit.

"The state of Ohio wisely supported increasing transit investment to \$70 million for budget years 2020 and 2021," she said. "This investment addressed years of transit underfunding and went a long way towards chipping away at the backload of capital maintenance projects."

Jason Warner, director of strategic engagement at the Greater Ohio Policy Center, called the current investment in public transit "historic."

The money, he said, led to expanded services, enhanced educational opportunities and capital investments.

"The historic funding approved by the legislature two years ago barely scratched the surface in addressing the needs of Ohio's public transit agencies," he said. "Despite one-time funding that has been provided at the federal level to address the needs of transit agencies as they have struggled to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic, this does not address the long-term needs of transit systems across the state. As I noted, prior to COVID, transit agencies large and small were investing in not only capital needs but developing new transportation options to ensure that the needs of the riding public and the communities they serve were being addressed."

The panel also received interested party testimony from representatives of the Southwest Ohio Regional Transit Authority, the Akron Metro Regional Transit Authority, the Toledo Area Transit Authority, the Stark Area Regional Transit Authority, Community Action Wayne/Medina, the Greater Dayton Regional Transit Authority, the Seneca-Crawford Regional Transit Authority, Access Tusc Transit and Hocking Athens Perry Community Action.