Each day in Ohio, an average of 500,000 riders use public transit, making Ohio 12th highest in ridership rate in the nation. Ohio ranks 40th in the nation in state public transit spending as a percentage of total state transportation dollars expended. Less than one percent of Ohio’s state transportation dollars go towards public transit. No state gasoline taxes are permitted for use by public transportation under Ohio’s Constitution. The responsibility for ownership, maintenance, and operation of public transit systems lies with the local units of government and transit authorities established under Chapter 36 of the Ohio Revised Code. Only 12 of the 59 transit systems in the state have any form of dedicated local funding from sales tax, income tax or property tax. Passenger fares collected by each transit authority do not cover the operating costs for the trip. The difference is provided by assistance from various levels of government and a local sales and use tax.

Background

According to the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT), public transportation:

- Eases traffic congestion
- Provides access to jobs and to rural areas
- Reduces energy use
- Lowers CO₂ emissions
- Boosts real estate values by fostering more livable communities
- Offers mobility to seniors
- Enhances mobility during natural and man-made disasters
- Provides safe and secure travel

Each day in Ohio, an average of 500,000 riders use public transportation, making Ohio 12th highest in ridership rate in the nation. Three of every five riders rely on public transit to get to work. Ohio ranks 37th in the nation for amount of federal transit funding per trip ($1.21 in 2005). Ohio ranks 42nd in the nation for amount of state transit funding per trip ($0.13 in 2005).

Since 1973, the ODOT Office of Transit has administered state and federal transit programs. The office provides funding and technical assistance, other services, and program oversight functions in carrying out the office’s purpose of promoting and supporting public transportation throughout the state.
The U.S. Census Bureau sets the criteria for defining non-urbanized and urbanized areas, and defines urbanized areas as an incorporated area with a population of 50,000 or more. The federal government, through the Federal Transit Authority (FTA), provides financial assistance to develop new transit systems and improve, maintain, and operate existing systems. The FTA uses the non-urbanized and urbanized area designations to distribute transit funding. The funding is provided according to the current federal transportation authorization bill.³

With over 11 million residents, the state of Ohio is seventh in total population in the United States.⁴ Ohio also has seven of the largest 88 metropolitan areas in the United States, tied for the second most in any state with Florida, behind only California.⁵ Cincinnati (24), Cleveland (25), Columbus (32), Dayton (59), Akron (71), Toledo (79) and Youngstown (88) are the anchors of these metropolitan areas. Many smaller metropolitan areas also call Ohio home including Canton (120), Springfield (272), Mansfield (296), Lima (333) and Sandusky (358). Other metropolitan areas that incorporate some of Ohio are Huntington, WV (160), Parkersburg, WV (242), Wheeling, WV (265) and Weirton, WV (299).

With such a high population and many urban areas, it is no surprise that Ohio is the home of 59 public transportation systems. While ODOT coordinates transportation efforts throughout the state of Ohio, ODOT does not own nor does it take responsibility for the operations of public transportation.² Responsibility for ownership, maintenance, and operation of public transit systems lies with the local units of government and transit authorities established under Chapter 36 of the Ohio Revised Code.

ODOT administers federal public transit programs. These programs make state and federal funds available to purchase vehicles, educate staff, increase safety monitoring and subsidize capital improvements.² No state gasoline taxes are permitted for use by public transportation under Ohio’s Constitution. Therefore, all state funding for transit is drawn from the General Revenue Fund. Ohio’s 2007 state budget reduced transit spending by 63% as compared to the 2000 state budget.

The public transit authorities in Ohio offer a diverse range of services depending upon the needs of the community or region in which they are located. Mass transit systems in the major cities of Cleveland, Cincinnati and Columbus typically employ 40-foot passenger buses. Public transportation, in addition to being an affordable alternative to the expenses of owning, operating, maintaining and insuring a personal vehicle, public transportation allows those who are unable to operate a personal vehicle the opportunity to travel within their areas. Almost all authorities, small and large alike, offer special transit services to the elderly and disabled.²

Mass transportation in particular reduces congestion, helps the environment with fewer carbon dioxide emissions, and reduces the likelihood of being in an accident by 25 times.⁵ Mass transit use increased in most Ohio communities offering services as fuel prices increased in the summer of 2008. Recent data shows that for some authorities, for example for the Central Ohio Transit Authority (COTA), ridership has remained high despite the return of gas prices to pre-spike levels.⁷

Ohio Transit Facts and Issues

Within Ohio there are 59 public transit systems – 24 urban and 35 rural. Thirteen of Ohio’s 88 counties are not serviced by any public transit system. Total ridership in 2007 was more than 129.9 million trips. Statewide, the elderly and disabled accounted for 13% of these trips. In
rural areas, the elderly and disabled accounted for over 47% of the trips. The total public transit fleet in Ohio consisted of 3,451 vehicles, of which 94% were wheelchair accessible. The average age of those vehicles is 7.5 years. The life expectancy of fixed route vehicles used in public transportation is 12 years, while the “goal” age of fleet vehicles is six years.\(^2\)

A recent survey of transit agencies throughout the state showed that even though ridership increased almost 5% between 2007 and 2008, the amount of transit vehicles available declined 6% and the amount of miles travelled fell by 8%. For the period between 2002 and 2008, response to call-in demand (door to door services provided to qualified customers.) grew by 30%.\(^8\)

While the majority of the transit vehicles in Ohio use gasoline or diesel as fuel, the Greater Dayton Regional Transit Authority has 52 electric transit vehicles and the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority (GCRTA), METRO Regional Transit Authority in Akron and Laketran have clean natural gas vehicles numbering 143, 45 and 12, respectively.\(^2\) COTA is in the process of securing six hybrid buses.\(^9\)

One authority in Ohio offers rail service. The GCRTA offers 38 miles of heavy rail mass transit servicing eighteen stations and operates 30 miles of light rail serviced by thirty-four stations.\(^10\) The GCRTA also recently completed the Euclid Corridor Transportation Project. The Euclid Corridor transformed seven miles of Euclid Avenue from downtown to University Circle into a bus oriented corridor. The corridor includes modification to street light operations to grant priority to buses servicing the corridor.\(^11\) By connecting the two largest employment centers in the greater Cleveland metropolitan area, the Euclid Corridor project has helped generate $4.3 billion in area investment.\(^11,12\) The Euclid Corridor project has demonstrated that capital investments within the system can benefit not only transit riders, but the economic vitality of the surrounding communities.

As of the 2000 census:

- 5.3% (0.6 million) of Ohio’s population were disabled
- 5% of the specialized transportation vehicle fleet in Ohio was not wheelchair accessible
- 6% of the public transit fleet in Ohio was not wheelchair accessible
- 8.6% (380,179) of Ohio households did not have a car
- 10.6% (1.2 million) of Ohio’s population lived below the poverty line
- 13.3% (1.5 million) of Ohio’s population were 65 or older (above the national average)
- 13 of Ohio’s 88 counties were not served by any public transportation
- 82.8% of Ohio’s population drove alone to work (above the national average)
- 2.4% of Ohio’s population took public transportation to work (below the national average)\(^{13}\)

Ohio ranks 40\(^{th}\) in the nation in state public transit spending as a percentage of total state transportation dollars expended. Less than one percent of Ohio’s state transportation dollars go towards public transit. Ohio spends less than half of what Indiana spends on public transportation, spends 5% of what Illinois spends, and less than 3% of Pennsylvania’s spending. Ohio’s public transit instead relies on local funding sources such as sales and use, income, and property taxes. In 2007, 71% of transit funding came from local revenue sources.
and fares, while only 4% came from the State budget. More than 79% of the local transit funding comes from sales and use taxes.\(^9\)

Passenger fares collected by each transit authority do not cover the operating costs for the trip. The difference is covered by assistance from various levels of government. For example, it costs the COTA $4.30 for fixed route operation per unlinked trip while the standard local fare charged by COTA is $1.50. For demand response trips, it costs COTA $33.57 per trip while the standard fare charged is $2.25.\(^2\)

The deficit between the operating costs and fare revenue can be reduced by lowering operating expenses. This can be achieved by replacing the older vehicles in the fleet with new ones which utilize less fuel and reduce maintenance expense.

In 2008, the Ohio Public Transit Association (OPTA) developed a statewide estimate of annual transit capital needs using data from several “best practice” transit operators. Using this information, an annual capital budget need of $400 million was identified for 2010. Prior to the economic downturn, transit operators throughout the state estimated their capital expenditures for 2010 at about $130 million. This results in a deficit of approximately $270 million, which would continue each year, plus inflation.\(^4\) For example, COTA will enter 2010 with over 60 buses beyond their useful life. The cost to replace these buses would be about $22 million. COTA’s current bus acquisition schedule is to buy 40 buses per year, at a cost of about $15 million per year in constant dollars.

In order for Ohioans to continue to reap the benefits of public transportation, funding needs to be increased to allow transit systems to cover their operating costs and invest in capital projects. American voters nationwide supported public transit initiatives 62% of the time in 2007, often increasing or continuing property, income or sales taxes.\(^6\)

**Policy Options**

A multi-faceted approach will be required to provide solutions that would ease the increasing demands on Ohio’s transportation system and improve transit conditions, capacity, and safety. The state must increase transit investments at all levels of government, make use of the latest technology, and work to change the behavior of the public if progress in reducing the reliance on automobiles for transportation is to be realized. Initiatives to reduce suburban sprawl through better planning of cities and communities that include transit systems, reduce dependence on personal vehicles for errands and work commutes by providing alternative means of transportation, and encourage businesses to support more flexible schedules and telecommuting are needed.

**Specific ASCE Ohio Council Recommendations**

- Increase funding levels for the state aid programs for transit development and create a dedicated source of funding for public transportation purposes
- Modify or eliminate the restrictions placed on funding provided to transit agencies by the federal government
- Integrate transit into the state multimodal transportation policy and recognize and take advantage of efficiencies
- Increase public/private partnerships to enhance opportunities for multimodal facility development
- Increase access to public transit services to reduce congestion in urban areas and connect to suburban and rural areas
- Commuter rail lines, whether on existing freight lines or on new track, need to be established in and between Ohio’s major cities
- Establish a mechanism to fund new rural transit systems and provisions to ensure use of all available rural funds
- Allow transit authorities a larger stake in projects that impact urban areas.

Sources

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7 The Columbus Dispatch, *Despite $2 Gas, Riders Stick with COTA*, April 26, 2009
8 *Committed to Commuters: Transit and Ohio’s New Energy Economy*, March, 2009
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22 Interview with William J. Lhota, CEO of the Central Ohio Transit Authority. January 21, 2009