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# POLICY MATTERS OHIO

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**—January 14, 2010

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Stark County – Stark Area Regional Transit Authority (SARTA) joins coalition to “Save Transit Now, Move Ohio Forward!” SARTA board members voted to co-sign on to the coalition statement yesterday evening, during a regularly scheduled board session.

The reason for the SARTA board’s action is clear. Kirt Conrad, Executive Director of Stark Area Regional Transit Authority, stated “We were forced to make severe cuts in September that resulted in over 500 people losing their ride to work. If we don’t get more funding from the state soon, we’ll have to make more cuts. We don’t want to do that. People depend on us.”

This coalition of transportation, public policy, social service, and environmental organizations joined forces in a campaign to reverse the decline of public transportation around Ohio. These 16 organizations (see the list at end of press release -- more are being added) represent tens of thousands of members and clients statewide.

Save Transit Now, Move Ohio Forward! suggests initial steps to safeguard public transit users from further service cuts/fare increases and to save Ohio’s economy and environment from further decline. These include:

- Overturning the state constitutional prohibition on using Ohio gas tax revenues and motor vehicle fees for non-highway purposes, thereby freeing up that revenue to be used for mass transit.
- Using flexible transportation funding sources currently available in Ohio – such as gas taxes collected from off-road vehicles, farming and landscaping equipment, and revenue raised from vanity license plates – to fund mass transit.
- Wherever possible, and whenever not already doing so, the Ohio Department of Transportation and Metropolitan Planning Organizations should take advantage of flexible federal highway funds and use them for public transportation.



Public transit is heavily used in Ohio. More Ohioans travel on buses and trains within our metro areas each day than fly in and out of Ohio's airports. More than 350,000 Ohioans each day use buses and trains to reach jobs, medical appointments, grocery stores, day care, pharmacies, schools, job training and other services. "For many people – including people with disabilities, seniors and low income individuals – public transit is the **only** way to get around," said Donna P. McNamee, a Laketran Trustee (who is also transit dependent due to disability), and a member of ODOT's 21st Century Transportation Priorities Task Force.

"Passenger vehicles are expensive to own, operate, and maintain," stated Phil Cole of the Ohio Association of Community Action Agencies, "often prohibitively expensive for the working poor. For the elderly and persons with a disability, driving may not be an option at all."

"Successful and livable cities around the world offer a healthy mix of transportation choices," said David Beach, director of the GreenCityBlueLake Institute. "It's time to invest in transit and make Ohio cities more competitive and sustainable."

The Save Transit Now, Move Ohio Forward! campaign was inaugurated in Greater Cleveland because it has as many public transit riders as all other Ohio transit agencies combined. However, the coalition pledges to fight for transit funding for all Ohio.

Despite the need for public transportation, Ohio transit agencies have been forced to slash transit services and raise fares. A decade ago, elimination of federal operating funding for public transit systems serving communities of more than 250,000 people forced states and local governments to make up for the federal cut. While most states dramatically increased support for public transit, the state of Ohio has cut funding by 75 percent since 2001.

Less than one percent of the Ohio Department of Transportation's budget is spent on public transit. "In fact," says Ken Prendergast, Executive Director of All Aboard Ohio, "the State of Ohio will spend more to cut the grass along its Interstates than for public transit operations." That is unacceptable.

"Other states do better," stated Amanda Woodrum, researcher at Policy Matters Ohio, "Ohio ranks 40<sup>th</sup> in the nation for relative commitment to public transit, despite the fact we are the seventh most populous state. Even Indiana spends three times more than Ohio, and Pennsylvania spends 33 times as much."

Cuts to federal and state transit funding have forced Ohio transit agencies to rely on local sales, income and property taxes, which are difficult to procure and tumbling due to the economy. Because of this overdependence on local funding, all Ohio public transit agencies are in serious trouble.

State funding for SARTA in 2010 declined more than 80 percent from its already inadequate levels in 2001. Continued state funding cuts, at a time when local sales tax revenues from the flagging economy brought in 15 percent less revenues, more than \$2 million less revenues than projected for SARTA in 2009, puts the Stark Area Regional Transit Authority in a downward spiral. In September, due to declines in expected revenues from the sales tax, SARTA was forced to cut services by 12 percent, lay off 17 employees, and end service on Sundays. However, fewer services forces transit riders to find other ways to get around, and that means fewer fares for SARTA. This transit death spiral is happening all across Ohio.



**It is not an accident our public transit agencies are in crisis – it is the direct result of choices we Ohioans have made on how to spend our state transportation dollars. We can make better choices.**

According to the American Public Transit Association, for every \$1 invested in public transportation, \$6 is generated in economic returns. Consider that:

1. *Investments in public transit produce nearly 20% more jobs than equivalent expenditures in new roads or highways.*
2. *Public transportation can provide more affordable and accessible transportation.* Owning, operating, and maintaining a passenger vehicle is expensive. For seniors, and people with disabilities, it may not be an option at all.
3. *A reliable system of public transportation can reduce dependence on polluting fossil fuels largely imported from elsewhere.* Nationally, public transportation allows us to save 900,000 automobile fill-ups each day, and saves 37 million metric tons of CO2 from being emitted, annually.
4. *Transit-oriented development is more environmentally friendly,* and can serve to reduce urban sprawl and revitalize our cities, by concentrating economic development. Currently, Ohio has an incoherent transportation system, putting schools, workplaces, shopping, health, and child-care centers all over the map, and leaving Ohioans dependent on passenger vehicles.
5. *Public transportation reduces traffic congestion.* Each year, public transportation saves hundreds of millions of hours in travel time nationally.
6. *Public transit creates healthier communities,* ultimately reducing air pollution, which disproportionately affects low income neighborhoods and communities of color; encouraging people to walk more; and, increasing access to jobs.

“Ohioans want and need a transportation alternative that includes safe, reliable and convenient public transportation services and we urge the Administration and legislators to move on the long term solution for transit now,” said Coby Williams, Legislative and Public Affairs Associate at the Ohio Environmental Council.

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## Co-signers:

- Stark Area Regional Transit Authority
- Laketran
- Ohio Public Transit Association
- Greater Cleveland RTA Citizen Advisory Board
- Alliance to Save Transit, Cincinnati
- GreenCityBlueLake Institute
- Ohio Empowerment Coalition and Contact Center
- Linking Employment, Abilities, and Potential (LEAP)
- Earth Day Coalition
- Ohio Apollo Alliance
- Policy Matters Ohio
- All Aboard Ohio
- Environment Ohio
- Ohio Environmental Council
- Bike, Walk Ohio!
- ClevelandBikes

**To join us, sign our online petition at <http://www.PetitionOnline.com/transOH/petition.html>**

## Additional Resources:

Policy Matters Ohio's transit funding report "Committing to Ohio's Commuters: The Transit Ticket to the New Energy Economy" is found at <http://www.policymattersohio.org/OhiosCommuters.htm>

Complete information about the RTA's budget situation is provided at:  
<http://www.riderta.com/budgetchallenges/>

Several revenue sources could be considered to address the current transit funding crisis as documented by All Aboard Ohio at: <http://members.cox.net/corridorscampaign/Operation-Sustain%20Transit.pdf>

The Ohio 21st Century Transportation Priorities Task Force recommended in January 2009 that transit be provided a dedicated funding stream of \$75 million annually in the initial year (increasing over a 6 year period to an amount representing 25% of the transit agencies' operating costs plus 50% of the non-federal match for capital expenses). See: <http://www.dot.state.oh.us/groups/tft/Pages/default.aspx>

