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## Catch the bus, Ohio

### **A new report highlights the role that public transportation can play in addressing key priorities of the state**

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On Wednesday, the Commentary Page featured a column by Amanda Woodrum of Policy Matters Ohio making the case for a larger investment of state dollars in public transportation. She develops the argument more fully in a recent report, "Committing to Commuters: Transit and Ohio's New Energy Economy," which can be found at [www.policymattersohio.org](http://www.policymattersohio.org). Her points deserve further attention. If Ohio wants to transform its economy, proving more agile and prosperous, it must find ways to enhance mass transit.

Consider the challenges ahead, say, becoming more energy-efficient, creating jobs, curbing urban sprawl and protecting the environment. Public transportation promises advances on all of these fronts.

One study found that each passenger mile traveled via mass transit yields half the carbon dioxide of traveling in a car. More, public transportation connects workers and jobs, providing the necessary mobility for those workers with lower incomes. In many ways, mass transit helps to revitalize metropolitan areas, the centerpieces of regional economies.

Unfortunately, as Woodrum makes plain in her report, Ohio falls short. State spending on public transportation has declined 48 percent the past decade. As a result, public transportation relies heavily on local dollars. In Summit County, voters recently rose to the occasion, approving additional revenue for the Metro Regional Transit Authority. The Metro system still suffers from narrowed service. Many local communities no longer can bear such a burden.

Ohio ranks 40th in the nation in the percentage of state transportation dollars spent on mass transit. Indiana spends twice as much. State spending in Illinois, Michigan and Pennsylvania far exceeds Ohio.

Ted Strickland deserves credit for seeking to bring greater direction and commitment to public transportation in the state. He wants to do a better job attracting federal dollars. His proposed rail service from Cincinnati to Columbus to Cleveland looks more practical in view of the changing landscape in energy and the environment. Yet his two-year budget plan calls for decreases in state spending.

Woodrum targets the flaw the state's approach. Public transportation lacks a dedicated funding source. The state constitution bars routing revenue from the motor fuel tax to public transportation. Thus, mass transit must compete with an array of priorities for money in the state general fund. To build a modern transportation system, Ohio must amend its constitution to permit the use of gas tax revenue for mass transit.

The federal government dedicates 17 percent of its gas tax to public transportation. Woodrum proposes that Ohio put the share of its gas tax at 20 percent. An amount at the level would advance the state. The spike in gas prices last summer provided a warning, many suddenly looking to mass transit and finding an inadequate system. Want to turn around Ohio? Make public transportation part of the ride.

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