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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 18, 2010

Community Action Network, Sierra Club join transit coalition

The largest poverty fighting and grassroots environmental organizations in Ohio are the two newest members of a coalition to improve public transportation in the state.

“Save Transit Now, Move Ohio Forward!” has united transportation, public policy, social service and environmental organizations to reverse the decline of public transportation support. The Ohio Association of Community Action Agencies and the Ohio Chapter of the Sierra Club have joined the group, advocating for a more affordable and energy saving option for Ohio travelers.

“Owning a car is not an option for everyone,” said Philip E. Cole, Executive Director of the Ohio Association of Community Action Agencies. “People do not move out of poverty without access to adequate transportation to get to work and school.”

Cole noted that *The State of Poverty Report*, released last month by OACAA, and the Regional Conversations on Poverty held throughout Ohio by the Governor’s Anti-Poverty Task Force, cited this issue as key.

“Ohio’s car-centric culture is a barrier to many living in poverty,” the report stated. “Ohio can take steps to build upon successful public transit systems, strengthen and maintain grant-funded transportation programs and continue to seek innovative solutions to this problem.”

Transportation options will also reduce pollution and create healthier communities. Ohio is the fourth largest emitter of greenhouse gases, and the transportation sector produces about one third of this pollution. Many counties fail to meet federal air quality standards for ozone and particulate matter, creating health problems such as asthma and other respiratory illnesses.

“Ohio’s current transportation system is outdated,” said Jennifer Miller, Conservation Program Coordinator for the Sierra Club of Ohio. “It is filling our children’s lungs with pollution and making it hard for working families to get ahead and seniors to remain mobile. Ohio must create a bold new vision for Ohio’s transportation sector – one that stops focusing on the automobile and begins investing in the cleanest, most efficient ways of moving people and goods.”

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. Despite

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the need for public transportation, Ohio transit agencies have been forced to slash transit services and raise fares.

“Public transit is heavily used in Ohio,” said Amanda Woodrum, researcher with Policy Matters Ohio. “More Ohioans travel on buses and trains within our metro areas each day than fly in and out of Ohio’s airports.”

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 2002.

“It’s no accident our public transit agencies are in crisis,” Woodrum said. “It is the direct result of choices we Ohioans have made on how to spend our state transportation dollars. We can make better choices.”

The Coalition advocates safeguarding public transit users from further service cuts and fare increases by improving the revenue stream for public transportation. It recommends changing the state constitution to allow gas tax revenues to be used for mass transit; using flexible transportation funding sources, such as fees from vanity license plates, to fund mass transit; and using flexible federal highway dollars wherever and whenever possible to fund public transportation.

The American Public Transportation Association has said that every \$1 invested in public transportation generates \$6 in economic returns by creating jobs, providing more affordable options for travelers and reducing pollution and traffic congestion.

“In this recession, investing in mass transit can be part of a much needed economic infusion,” Woodrum said.

The Ohio Association of Community Action Agencies represents Ohio’s Community Action network which consists of 52 agencies around the state serving the needs of low-income people in all of Ohio’s 88 counties. They employ more than 6,000 people and provide services to nearly 800,000 Ohioans.

The Ohio Chapter of the Sierra Club was established in 1968 and is part of the oldest and most influential grassroots environmental organization in the nation. The national network dates to 1892 and boasts 1.3 million members. In Ohio, 25,000 members and supporters provide volunteer service and support through six local groups.

Other cosigners of the Save Transit Now, Move Ohio Forward coalition statement include:

- Alliance for Regional Transit, Cincinnati
- All Aboard Ohio
- Bike, Walk Ohio!
- Cleveland Bikes
- Earth Day Coalition
- Environment Ohio
- Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority (RTA)
- Greater Cleveland RTA Citizen Advisory Board
- Green City Blue Lake Institute
- Laketrans

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- Linking Employment Abilities and Potential (LEAP)
- Lorain County Board of Commissioner
- Ohio Apollo Alliance
- Ohio Empowerment Coalition and Contact Center
- Ohio Environmental Council
- Ohio Public Transit Association
- Policy Matters Ohio
- Stark Area Regional Transit Authority

To join the Coalition, sign the online petition at www.petitiononline.com/transOH/petition.html.

For more information, visit www.ohiopolicymatters.org.

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