



RTA needs state and federal operating support to keep buses in the drivers' seat -- editorial

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By **The Plain Dealer Editorial Board**

The numerous service cuts and job layoffs proposed by the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority couldn't come at a worse time. Riders who still have jobs need to get to work. Riders without jobs need public transit to help find one. And no one wants to see bus drivers and mechanics laid off while Ohio's unemployment rate climbs.

But the grim economic conditions slamming RTA are painful but familiar.

With consumers hoarding their pennies, the county's 1 percent sales tax -- providing up to 70 percent of the system's \$260 million annual budget -- can't bring in enough to keep the current flotilla of buses on the road without, it appears, some concessions from union employees.

Unfortunately, the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 268, which represents about 1,800 bus drivers, and RTA management are experiencing road rage. The union wants to discuss safety issues, while General Manager Joe Calabrese is bent on negotiating cost-cutting measures. Both sides need to address both issues through negotiations.

Of course, few matters generate as much heat as changing or eliminating bus routes -- as Calabrese well knows by now. It's understandable. Many bus patrons have everything riding on their neighborhood buses, and there is likely to be a furious outcry at RTA's public meetings on route changes in January.

RTA needs to reconsider both the severity and scope of its proposed route cuts. But attacking Calabrese won't change things. Fares provide just 20 percent of operating costs. The sad truth is that RTA loses money every time a bus leaves the garage; as with all public transit systems, it needs public subsidies to survive.

The better route is to change the woeful support the state of Ohio gives to mass transit. This state ranks 40th among the 50 states in its aid to public transit as a percentage of its transportation budget, according to Policy Matters Ohio. Per capita, Pennsylvania spends 33 percent more.

To make matters worse, a constitutional amendment Ohio voters adopted in 1947 forbids any portion of the gas tax from being used except on highway programs. The amendment is outdated and ought to be changed.

The ban may have been appropriate when Ohio needed to build highways, but it's no longer justifiable. In the 21st century, the public needs buses and trains to ease congestion, cut pollution and streamline travel while boosting jobs.

Other ideas some states have explored to broaden the base of support for public transit include imposing small extra fees on motor vehicle registrations and tire purchases.

The federal government has been generous with money for eye-catching construction projects like the RTA HealthLine on Euclid Avenue -- but stingy with operating dollars except in some limited cases.

Yet the same philosophy that lies behind projects such as the HealthLine -- promoting public transit as a green investment and economic development lever -- applies more urgently to keeping public transit viable. Otherwise, these larger investments will become a waste of taxpayers' dollars.

RTA needs state and federal support to stay on the road. The public should demand it.

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