



Public Transit in Central Ohio

A Study with Consensus Questions

April 2010



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*Special thanks to Katherine Gharrity and Celia Vail
of the League of Women Voters of Delaware County*

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About the Study

The League of Women Voters of Metropolitan Columbus has had for many years a position supporting mass transit. However, the absence of criteria for evaluating particular public transit proposals has limited the role that the League can play in promoting public transit and evaluating and/or advocating for particular proposals. At the Annual Meeting on June 3, 2009, the membership voted to update this position to make it more useful.

The Public Transit Study Committee began meeting in June 2009 and held regular meetings through April 2010. Two members from the League of Women Voters of Delaware County also participated, providing valuable information about public transportation in Delaware County, which gave us a broader perspective.

Members of the study group met with representatives from the Central Ohio Transit Authority, Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission, Ohio Department of Transportation, Columbus Chamber of Commerce, and the Alternative Transportation Committee of Simply Living.

Extensive written material was reviewed. Articles were published regularly in the League's newsletter, *The Voter*. Various informative websites are cited throughout this paper. All of this material can be found on the League's website, www.lwvcols.org.

There are two websites where individuals interested in transit in Columbus have been offering their own opinions. One is the transit section of www.columbusunderground.com. The other one is *Xing Columbus: Discussions About Getting Around Columbus, Ohio* at xingcolumbus.wordpress.com.

In addition to the written material, the League sponsored a public forum on March 18, 2010. Panelists included Brent Simonds, advocacy coordinator for the Mid-Ohio Board for an Independent Living Environment (MOBILE); Chester Jourdan, executive director of the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC); and Bill Lhota, president and chief executive officer of the Central Ohio Transit Authority (COTA). A video of the forum will be available at www.lwvcols.org.

This study includes both background material and consensus questions with pro and con arguments. The preferred and most commonly used decision-making process in the League is called *consensus*. It is defined as "collective opinion or accord." It is *not* simple majority or unanimity, but a general and substantial agreement of the members present at the meeting. It is an evolutionary process reached through exhaustive and free-flowing discussion among members in which all points of view have been considered and a "sense of the group" emerges. Voting is *not* a part of the process. Minority opinions are always noted but they do not affect the final consensus response.

Members of the League of Women Voters of Metropolitan Columbus will use this study and the consensus questions to determine if there is consensus among the membership. If there is consensus, then the League will have a new position to use when advocating for public transit. If there is not consensus, then the League will not take a position on public transit.

It should, however, be noted that a general League position exists at the national level that can, if desired, be used locally. That position, part of the League's position on Meeting Basic Human Needs, states: "The LWVUS believes that energy-efficient and environmentally sound transportation systems should afford better access to housing and jobs and will continue to examine transportation policies in light of these goals." No local position can contradict a national or state position, but it was the goal of members in approving this study in 2009 that a more specific position germane to the metropolitan Columbus area would be reached.

About the League of Women Voters

The League of Women Voters of Metropolitan Columbus encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy. The League is where hands-on work to safeguard democracy leads to civic improvement – and has been for 90 years.

Men and women of all parties and political persuasions come together within the League of Women Voters for civil discourse about our nation's and our community's most pressing issues. The League is strictly nonpartisan; we neither support nor oppose candidates for office at any level of government. At the same time, the League is wholeheartedly political and works to influence policy through advocacy. We are the original grassroots citizen network, directed by the consensus of our members. Organized in three nesting layers (local, state, and national), the League offers members the chance to make a difference at any level of government.

The League is a grassroots membership organization. Educational studies and research material on a variety of topics – from representative government to social policy to natural resources to international relations – can be found, along with information on joining the League, at www.lwvcols.org.

Central Ohio's Current Transportation Scene

The Central Ohio Transit Authority (COTA) has provided public transit in Franklin County since January 1974. According to the 2005 National Transit Database, COTA's service area is 325 square miles, serving a population of 1,057,915. (COTA's area extends into other counties where some towns cross county lines.) COTA buses operate on 19 local routes, 8 crosstown routes, and 40 express routes (which run at rush hour only). Three routes – #1 Cleveland and Livingston Avenues, #2 High and Main Streets, and #10 Broad Street – account for half the ridership. Through Project Mainstream, COTA also offers mobility services to address the needs of people with disabilities who are unable to use the bus.¹

COTA uses 295 buses that are 1995-2010 models for its fixed-route bus service; 220 of them are on the road at peak hour. Project Mainstream uses 57 paratransit vehicles that are 2006-2009 models; 47 of them are on the road at peak hour.

Of the 50 largest urbanized areas in the 2000 census, Columbus ranked 37th in population. In 2007, it ranked 45th in number of passenger trips using transit and 49th in number of passenger miles.²

Despite growing demand for public transportation, declining sales tax revenue is forcing transit agencies in all of Ohio's major cities to slash service and raise fares. The loss in Columbus has been tempered by a sales tax increase for COTA passed in 2006.

On December 15, 2008, the Columbus City Council adopted a Complete Streets ordinance that states, "Where feasible, new or rebuilt streets will be designed for safe access for all users, whether they drive, ride, pedal or walk."³ Still, the overall infrastructure of the Franklin County area has been built to support transportation by car. And this is in a county where, according to the 2006 American Community Survey, 36,000 households do not have a car available.

The Franklin County Coordinated Plan: Improving Transportation Coordination in Franklin County, Ohio (April 2008) was prepared by MORPC in partnership with COTA and with funding assistance from the Federal Transit Administration. The report describes all of the entities in the county that fund and administer transportation programs and that provide transportation services. The report then cites

¹ See www.cota.com for more information on the services COTA offers.

² See Table 4 in the 2009 *Public Transportation Fact Book* at www.apta.com.

³ www.columbus.oh.us/transportation

gaps that exist in meeting the transportation needs of the county's residents, targeting low-income individuals, people with disabilities, and seniors. Identified gaps are:

- **Geographic gaps:** Areas with no transportation service or very little, such as service to some shopping malls and to some areas with extensive employment opportunities.
- **Capacity gaps:** Ability of providers to meet existing needs, such as affordable options for running errands, going to doctor appointments, and for those needing ongoing medical treatment such as dialysis.
- **Service time gaps:** A mismatch between when service is available and when needs exist, such as late-night service for workers on second and third shifts.
- **Awareness gaps:** Lack of awareness of available services, such as low-income people who are unaware of jobs that could be accessed through public transportation and county agencies that are unaware of each other's programs.

The report then suggests how the various entities can coordinate what they do to better meet those needs. Service strategies are presented in order of priority. The first service strategy listed is to provide late-night transportation service, targeted at second- and third-shift workers. The first policy coordination strategy is to establish a one-stop resource for transportation information. COTA is the designated recipient of federal funds tied to the Franklin County Coordinated Plan.¹

Proposed Criteria, Background, and Questions

The study committee is proposing that the League's position on public transit incorporate the following criteria:



Public Transit Criterion #1: Connectivity and Mobility

It should be the ultimate goal of a transit system to connect with major places of employment; educational and medical facilities; shopping hubs; religious, sporting, and cultural venues; and other places where all people, including those with disabilities, go to work, shop, and play. Integration and coordination of different modes and providers of transportation is key. Where appropriate, consideration should be given to connectivity to adjoining communities outside Franklin County.

Background Information

Mobility is a growing priority for consumers—and a growing source of frustration.²

Ideally, people should have at least five choices as to mode of transportation: feet, bike, transit, taxi, and private vehicle, along with the ability to mix and match them. It was recommended by Ohio's 21st Century Transportation Priorities Task Force³ to “give Ohioans more options for getting where they want to go...by developing a balanced and efficient system that ensures connectivity among all modes of transportation.” The Ohio Department of Transportation website⁴ is currently featuring *ODOT's 2010-2011 Business Plan*, which is a follow-up to the task force report.

Steve Tugent of the Columbus Chamber of Commerce told members of the committee that the economic advantages of transit are: 1) It attracts business to the area, 2) It helps retain and grow business, and 3) It builds the capacity for growth by attracting skilled young people to the area. A survey

¹ www.morpc.org/transportation/study/coordinated_plan.asp

² *The New Shape of Suburbia*, Urban Land Institute, 2003

³ www.dot.state.oh.us/groups/tft, January 2009

⁴ www.dot.state.oh.us

was conducted for the Chamber that found that a good transit system, especially one with fixed guideway, is an important factor in attracting young workers to an area and in keeping them there. (A “fixed guideway” refers to any transit service that uses exclusive or controlled rights of way or rails, entirely or in part. The term includes heavy rail, commuter rail, light rail, monorail, trolleybus, aerial tramway, inclined plane, cable car, automated guideway transit, that portion of motor bus service operated on exclusive or controlled rights-of-way, and high occupancy vehicle [HOV] lanes.)

It is estimated that every \$10 million in capital investment for public transportation yields \$30 million in increased business sales, and that every \$10 million in operating investment for public transportation yields \$32 million in increased business sales. Further, every \$1 taxpayers invest in public transportation generates \$6 in economic returns.¹

According to the 2006 American Community Survey, approximately 13,519 people commute by public transportation in Franklin County – a very small percentage of the population. Public transit as it currently exists does not enable most residents to reach many of their destinations. For example, Columbus stands alone amongst its peers in not having direct transit service from the airport to the central business district.²

Many people will continue to rely exclusively on their automobiles unless public transportation enables them to reach their destination, with good connections, be it from rail to bus or from bus to public vans.

Today, many residents of Franklin County go to work or to enjoy recreational and cultural activities in adjoining counties, and vice versa. It is important for public transportation to address the needs of these people by connecting to the transportation systems in those counties or by providing service beyond Franklin County’s borders.

Consensus Question #1a

Should one criterion for a transit system be that it connects with major places of employment; educational and medical facilities; shopping hubs; religious, sporting, and cultural venues; and other places where people go to work, shop, and play?

PRO	CON
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A public transit system should enable people to get to all or most of the places where they want to go. • A transit system cannot compete with the private automobile unless it gets people to most of the places that they can reach by car economically and efficiently. • Transit is a condition of employment for many people, and businesses depend on transit as a way for their employees to get to work. • Businesses depend on transit as one way to transport their customers. • Transit access points support and increase adjacent businesses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It would be too costly to expect public transit to get people to all the places they can reach by car, and a more limited role is more realistic. • Not enough people would use public transit to justify an extensive and costly system. • Current dispersed settlement patterns limit the ability of public transit to serve all areas of the county.

¹ Cambridge Systematics, *Public Transportation and the Nation’s Economy*, October 1999

² xingcolumbus.wordpress.com/2009/12/12

Consensus Question #1b

Should different modes and providers of transportation be integrated/connected, and should it be easy and quick to make connections between different transit lines?

PRO	CON
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrating different modes of transportation will help riders to move from one form of transportation to another to reach their destination. By integrating different modes of transportation, Franklin County can make cost-effective decisions about how best to get riders to their destinations. The more seamless the system is, the more people will choose to use it. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The cost of developing interconnected transportation systems would be prohibitive. Riders in Franklin County are wedded to the automobile and are not going to be willing to transfer from one method of transportation to another. Transferring between different modes of transportation is too time consuming to attract many riders.

Consensus Question #1c

Should consideration be given to connectivity with transportation systems in adjoining counties?

PRO	CON
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Since people routinely move between counties, the transportation system should be connected to transportation systems in adjoining counties to facilitate this movement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Franklin County needs to address its own transportation needs, and other counties should address theirs.



Public Transit Criterion #2: Cost

The cost of building, operating, and maintaining the system should be considered and preference given to economical systems that maximize ridership, using government subsidies as appropriate.

Background Information

It is important to remember that all modes of transportation are subsidized, automobile transportation more so than public transit.

The federal government has been increasing the amount of money available to local governments for public transit for those with low income, the elderly, and people with disabilities. There are three specific programs funded to assist 1) low-income individuals to access jobs, 2) in the purchase of vehicles to transport seniors and people with disabilities, and 3) in funding new transportation services for people with disabilities.

Transportation funding is in a state of flux now, as outlined in the article from the February edition of *The Voter* above.

Consensus Question #2

Should the cost of building, operating, and maintaining the system be considered and preference given to economical systems that maximize ridership, using government subsidies as appropriate?

PRO	CON
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The county has a limited budget and should provide transportation that is as cost effective as possible. • Transit benefits the entire community, even people who do not personally avail themselves of it, by reducing traffic congestion and air pollution and by increasing options for employment. • A transit system that will be attractive to riders cannot be financed by fares alone, particularly given that many riders are not affluent. • A transit system that is attractive to riders will become more popular and will need less in the way of subsidies. • All methods of transportation, including automobile travel, depend on public financing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost considerations may discourage creation of modern, attractive transportation systems that in the long run will better attract riders and strengthen the economy. • Transit should be self supporting. It is not fair to ask non-riders to subsidize riders. • Given the current economic situation, the county should not be subsidizing transit.



Public Transit Criterion #3: Customer Experience

Transit should be safe, convenient, comfortable, easy to use, and affordable for all Franklin County residents, including the elderly and people with disabilities.

Background Information

Transit buses are an extremely safe way to travel. The fatality rate is 0.02 per 100 million passenger miles, compared with 0.71 deaths for cars.¹

More than 80,000 people in Franklin County have a disability that hinders their ability to travel.² All COTA's fixed-route buses are accessible as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act. COTA's paratransit service is called Project Mainstream and is available to riders who are ADA paratransit eligible. The ADA complementary paratransit service area is defined as corridors that are within three-quarters of a mile of COTA's fixed bus routes. The service hours are the same as that of the particular fixed route that it is near. An *ADA Complementary Paratransit Service Compliance Review* was conducted February 6-9, 2007, for the Federal Transit Administration Office of Civil Rights. It was a thorough evaluation of COTA's Project Mainstream and gives an interesting picture of the service and the challenges it faces, such as dispatchers finding out when they schedule a pickup if curb-to-curb service is adequate or if additional assistance is required and what policy to have regarding late cancellations and no shows. (See the article from the January issue of *The Voter* above for more information about COTA's paratransit services.)

Over a fourth of the population of Franklin County is age 50 or over.³ Where adequate public transportation is available, older Americans tend to make regular use of it.⁴

¹ Table 16, 2009 Public Transportation Fact Book, www.apta.com

² *Franklin County Coordinated Plan*, page 39

³ *Franklin County Coordinated Plan*, p. 39

⁴ *Ageing Americans: Stranded Without Options*, Surface Transportation Policy Project, 2004

At www.publictransportation.org, it is possible to calculate how much money an individual in a two-person household can save by taking public transportation and living with one less car, taking into consideration the cost of owning and driving a car including the cost of gasoline and parking, and comparing that with the price of a monthly bus pass.

Consensus Question #3

Should positive customer experience (safety, convenience, ease of use, and affordability) be a consideration in assessing public transit?

PRO	CON
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transit can be more economical than driving, especially when the cost of gasoline and parking is factored in. • Transit can often take riders closer to their destination than driving and parking. • Taking the bus enables the rider to sit back and relax or accomplish other things while someone else is driving and avoid stressful driving situations. • Using public transit provides an opportunity to interact socially with a diverse population and furthers a sense of community. • Because transit trips often involve walking, users are three times more likely to meet the recommended 30 minutes a day of moderate physical activity.¹ • Taking the bus is safer than driving. • Transit provides independence for non-drivers and the elderly and people with disabilities. • Transit can open up employment opportunities unavailable to non-drivers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People don't like to plan trips in advance. • Those unfamiliar with taking transit are reluctant to learn a whole new set of skills. • Buses are too crowded at rush hour. • You can catch germs from other passengers. • Waiting at transit stops is unpleasant in inclement weather.



Public Transit Criterion #4: Travel Time and Reliability

A public transit system should be efficient, and schedules and travel time should be reliable and predictable.

Background Information

COTA plans to have an \$8.1 million bus-tracking system giving real-time information operating in early 2011. To prepare to make better use of that system, COTA began a pilot program last October in the OSU area. It has been very successful. Riders phone a central computer and punch in the number on a bus stop sign. The next time the bus is scheduled to arrive is text-messaged to the rider. The pilot program is intended to inch toward a goal of riders having easy access to information as to where a

¹ *Science Daily*, March 9, 2009

particular bus actually is and when it will arrive at a given location. COTA then plans to hire a third-party service to distribute that information via text messaging.

It is likely that at some point in the future Columbus will get a form of fixed guideway system. One of the advantages of these systems is that they are more reliable because they have a dedicated right of way.

Consensus Question #4

Should a public transit system be efficient with schedules and travel time that are reliable and predictable?

PRO	CON
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With current and future technology, it will be possible to know exactly when a bus will arrive at a given location. • Public transit provides a more dependable option to driving in bad weather. • Efficient public transit can reduce traffic congestion. • With better predictability of arrival time, more people will ride transit. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People don't like to plan trips in advance. • People perceive that their freedom to go where and when they want will be restricted if they take transit. • People resist having to arrange their life around a transit schedule.



Public Transit Criterion #5: Land Use and Development

Advocates for public transit should be actively involved in the development of central Ohio's long-term plans for land use, economic development, and the reduction of urban sprawl throughout the metro area.

Background Information

Urban sprawl results in more dependence on cars. Research has found that concentrated mixed-use development along transit-served corridors improves the quality of life for everyone.¹

Consensus Question #5

Should public transit system advocates be actively involved in the development of central Ohio's long-term plans for land use, economic development, and the reduction of urban sprawl?

PRO	CON
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having travel options affects the quality of life of individuals and population groups. • A public transit system is less efficient where the population is widely dispersed. By limiting sprawl, transit systems can be more effective. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Given Franklin County's development, it is too late to expect transit proponents to have any significant effect on land use, economic development, or urban sprawl. • The majority of Franklin county residents desire to live in communities dependent on the automobile and with lower densities.

¹ *The Transit Metropolis: A Global Inquiry* by Robert Cervero, 1998



Public Transit Criterion #6: Environmental Impact

New transportation systems or modifications to existing systems should be designed to reduce or minimize pollution and consumption of energy.

Background Information

The transportation sector can directly reduce carbon emissions by reducing vehicle miles traveled, expanding the use of alternative fuels, and encouraging energy-efficient practices.

Experts have proven that the more cars a community, and the more they are driven, the more particulates end up in the air people breathe.¹

The United States has the world's most car-reliant cities. U.S. drivers consume roughly 43 percent of the world's gasoline to propel less than 5 percent of the world's population.²

Current research indicates that future growth in private motorized vehicle travel in the next 30 years could negate the emissions savings from CAFÉ (Corporate Average Fuel Economy) standards. For the United States to achieve reductions in transportation emissions on the scale required to limit the potentially disastrous effects of global warming, Americans need more travel choices.³

Public transportation use currently reduces CO₂ emissions by more than 37 million metric tons every year in the United States by reducing travel and congestion on roadways and supporting more efficient land use patterns.⁴

Consensus Question #6

Should new transportation systems or modifications to existing systems be designed to reduce or minimize pollution and consumption of energy?

PRO	CON
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public transit can allow people to drive their cars less, which is good for the environment and saves money on gas. Public transit can move more people in less space. Public transit can reduce congestion. Public transit can reduce pollution. Public transit can make the U.S. less dependent on foreign oil. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empty buses waste gas. The cost of designing energy-efficient systems is prohibitive. The hype about pollution and energy consumption has been overblown.



Public Transit Criterion #7: Marketing

A concentrated marketing/education campaign is a necessary component of a successful transit system.

¹ *Urban Sprawl*, Greenhaven Press, 2008, page 87

² *Urban Sprawl*, page 103

³ Urban Land Institute, "Growing Cooler: The Evidence on Urban Development and Climate Change," 2008

⁴ Bailey, Linda, *The Broader Connection between Public Transportation, Energy Conservation and Greenhouse Gas Reductions*, ICF International, 2008

Background Information

Although the public sees many advantages to transit, transit is of less concern to them than other issues. Transit use has grown, but at the same time automobile ownership has increased to the point where, in the United States, there are now more automobiles than licensed drivers, so transit must co-exist with the car. To gain momentum for transit support, an effective communications message must reach beyond current transit users.

Key support messages that clarify the personal and universal benefits of public transportation include:¹

- Public transportation has economic consequences: enhanced property/real estate values, employment opportunities, and growth of communities.
- Public transportation has environmental benefits: reduced congestion, reduced pollution.
- Public transportation saves productive time by lessening traffic congestion.
- Public transportation makes the United States less dependent on foreign oil.
- Public transportation saves people money on gas.
- Public transportation enhances quality of life for non-drivers through reduced personal stress and provision of independence.
- Public transportation improves people's lives.

Consensus Question #7

Is a marketing/education campaign a necessary component of a successful transit system?

PRO	CON
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Until the public is educated about the advantages of public transportation, they will be unwilling to pay for it. • People who do not currently use public transportation do not understand why they should support it. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing is a waste of money. • If public transportation is of value, people will understand that and do not need marketing hype.

¹ *Understanding How to Motivate Communities to Support and Ride Public Transportation*, Transportation Research Board, TCRP Report #122, 2008

Summaries

Recommended Criteria for League Position on Public Transit

- 1) **Connectivity and Mobility:** It should be the ultimate goal of a transit system to connect with major places of employment; educational and medical facilities; shopping hubs; religious, sporting, and cultural venues; and other places where all people, including those with disabilities, go to work, shop, and play. Integration and coordination of different modes and providers of transportation is key. Where appropriate, consideration should be given to connectivity to adjoining communities outside Franklin County.
- 2) **Cost:** The cost of building, operating, and maintaining the system should be considered and preference given to economical systems that maximize ridership, using government subsidies as appropriate.
- 3) **Customer Experience:** Transit should be safe, convenient, comfortable, easy to use, and affordable for all Franklin County residents, including the elderly and people with disabilities.
- 4) **Travel Time and Reliability:** A public transit system should be efficient, and schedules and travel time should be reliable and predictable.
- 5) **Land Use and Development:** Advocates for public transit should be actively involved in the development of central Ohio's long-term plans for land use, economic development, and the reduction of urban sprawl throughout the metro area.
- 6) **Environmental Impact:** New transportation systems or modifications to existing systems should be designed to reduce or minimize pollution and consumption of energy.
- 7) **Marketing:** A concentrated marketing/education campaign is a necessary component of a successful transit system.

Consensus Questions

- 1a) Should one criterion for a transit system be that it connects with major places of employment; educational and medical facilities; shopping hubs; religious, sporting, and cultural venues; and other places where people go to work, shop, and play?
- 1b) Should different modes and providers of transportation be integrated/connected, and should it be easy and quick to make connections between different transit lines?
- 1c) Should consideration be given to connectivity with transportation systems in adjoining counties?
- 2) Should the cost of building, operating, and maintaining the system be considered and preference given to economical systems that maximize ridership, using government subsidies as appropriate?
- 3) Should positive customer experience (safety, convenience, ease of use, and affordability) be a consideration in assessing public transit?
- 4) Should a public transit system be efficient with schedules and travel time that are reliable and predictable?
- 5) Should public transit system advocates be actively involved in the development of central Ohio's long-term plans for land use, economic development, and the reduction of urban sprawl?
- 6) Should new transportation systems or modifications to existing systems be designed to reduce or minimize pollution and consumption of energy?
- 7) Is a marketing/education campaign a necessary component of a successful transit system?