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Opinion

Lawmakers must reject Gov. DeWine's shortsighted bid to slash public transit funding

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The Laketrans #10 express bus, which drives commuters back and forth from downtown Cleveland to Lake County, pulls up to a bus stop in front of the Mill-Rose Co. in Mentor on March 12, 2019. In testimony last week, Laketrans CEO Ben Capelle and other transit experts urged an Ohio House committee to reject Gov. Mike DeWine's proposed savaging of the state transit budget, for economic competitiveness and other reasons. The editorial board concurs. (Lisa DeJong, The Plain Dealer, File, 2019) Lisa DeJong/The Plain Dealer



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By Editorial Board, cleveland.com and The Plain Dealer

Gov. Mike DeWine has proposed, as part of Ohio's pending 2021-23 budget, [slashing state aid to mass transit](#) systems, including the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority.

That's particularly troubling because DeWine isn't proposing an austerity budget. Just the reverse, he's seeking a healthy increase in total spending, including by double-digits in the second year -- but not for mass transit. It would be cut by nearly 90%

from current funding in his proposal.

All told, the governor wants to boost state General Revenue Fund spending by 3.4% in the budget's first year, then by 11% in the second year. (Because Ohio's fiscal year starts July 1, the two-year budget will run from July 1, 2021 to June 30, 2023.)

Yet, despite those increases, DeWine wants to eviscerate already lean state support for mass transit systems, to a paltry \$7.4 million a year.

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That's down from \$70 million annually as budgeted the last two years, reduced because of the pandemic to about \$67 million in fiscal 2020 and \$56 million this fiscal year.

It's an eye-popping reduction for a state that already ranks low nationally in transit funding.

Ben Capelle, CEO of Laketrans, the Lake County Regional Transit Authority, told the House Finance Committee Wednesday that Ohio's transit spending equated to only about 63 cents annually per Ohioan before a budget boost two years ago.

Pennsylvania, he said, spent about \$129 per person and Michigan, about \$27 a person annually.

State Transportation Director Jack Marchbanks told lawmakers the proposed cut would largely just be a return to budget levels prior to 2019, but that is also misleading.

Capelle testified that Ohio transit spending historically was about \$70 million before significant cuts in recent decades.

DeWine himself proposed \$40 million annually in his first budget; the boost to \$70 million that lawmakers insisted on was intended largely to compensate transit systems like RTA for millions they'd lost annually from elimination of an Ohio Medicaid managed-care sales tax after June 30, 2017. For RTA, loss of that tax revenue represented an \$18 million annual hit.

The state of Ohio had negotiated a fix for loss of the managed-care tax that kept state revenues intact and actually increased them slightly, but counties and transit systems were out of luck, apart from a time-limited state revenue boost.

Now, DeWine wants to take most mass transit funding out of the state budget. Why? And why now?

Public transit contributes to economic development -- bringing people to jobs. It eases racial and income inequality, by expanding options for those without other transportation options in both cities and rural areas. And it represents an investment in a greener future where mass transit can help replace passenger car miles.

The draconian cuts the governor has proposed are singularly ill-timed. All of Ohio's public transit systems were hard-hit by COVID-19 in terms of ridership and revenue, not to mention the sacrifice by transit drivers and others who fell ill with COVID-19 in the course of their work.

Yet during the pandemic, these transit systems have continued to provide a lifeline to jobs, medical appointments, COVID-19 vaccinations and grocery shopping for Ohioans. And an Ohio State University study last fall found that people in the Midwest and the deep South particularly relied on transit systems to get to work during the pandemic, with essential workers such as health care workers heavily represented in ridership.

Admittedly, this year, RTA doesn't expect layoffs or service cuts thanks to money remaining from \$112 million in federal CARES Act aid it received, cleveland.com's Courtney Astolfi reported in December. Nonetheless, RTA also has \$500 million in unfunded infrastructure projects -- a legacy, in part, of state underfunding that forced it to delay needed capital projects.

Late in December, Congress passed and then-President Donald Trump signed the Consolidated Appropriations Act, which mustered \$14 billion nationally for mass transit. An estimated \$60 million of that could flow to RTA.

The federal money is one-time, and state aid, if DeWine has his way, will virtually disappear. Yet the governor wants to woo out-of-staters to Ohio with a budget that starves a largely urban amenity – mass transit? If DeWine won't reset Ohio's transportation priorities, the legislature must.

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