

# Could Ohio lose out on tens of millions in federal passenger rail investments? Editorial Board Roundtable

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With \$66 billion on the table in federal infrastructure funding to expand Amtrak passenger service nationwide, some states have been working for months on their proposals. In Ohio, the funding, if a successful proposal is made, could mean hundreds of millions in passenger rail upgrades and improved hubs at existing stops like Cleveland while restoring service to cities that lost Amtrak years ago, including Columbus.

In fact, Ohio was prioritized in Amtrak planning last year for five new routes -- four of them through Cleveland, including a new line running via Columbus to Cincinnati.

Despite that, there is no sign Gov. Mike DeWine is working on a proposal, Cleveland.com's Susan Glaser reports. This is despite clear interest from the Greater Columbus Convention Center, which has commissioned a study for a new train station on the site of the now-demolished Union Station. Columbus is thought to be the largest city in the nation without passenger rail service.

An Ohio House concurrent resolution supporting expanded Amtrak service has attracted only 10 co-sponsors, only one of them Republican. State Rep. Haraz Ghanbari from near Toledo told Glaser, "If I could take a train from here to Columbus, you better believe I would be on that train."

Unlike 2010, when Gov. John Kasich famously sent \$400 million in rail-upgrade funds back to the federal government, the current proposal doesn't have spending requirements from states -- for the first five years.

But states do have to agree to start paying half the operating costs after that. The Dispatch has reported that could amount to \$8.5 million to \$10 million annually for Ohio. Still, that pales compared to what taxpayers pay now for transportation subsidies in Ohio beyond user fees like gas taxes. In 2020, Ohio taxpayers paid \$78 million in General Fund dollars to subsidize transportation, the state reports.

Decision time is fast approaching. Amtrak CEO Bill Flynn has told reporters that the Cleveland-Columbus-Dayton-Cincinnati corridor is ideal for a passenger rail line. That augurs well for Ohio -- if it wants the money.

"There's a real opportunity here," Flynn said, according to Glaser. "And it's our goal to get it done."

Will Ohio “get it done?” Or will it miss out on a chance to create true intercity passenger rail in the state? Are Ohioans just too wedded to their cars to be wooed onto trains -- even as gas prices rise? Our Editorial Board Roundtable examines the options.

**Leila Atassi, manager, public interest and advocacy:**

Leaving federal money on the table for any infrastructure project certainly feels foolish and shortsighted. But when it comes to passenger rail service, maybe we should revisit the data backing up the claim that this proposal actually meets a need – especially since Zoom has all but purged our lives of work travel and long-distance commutes.

**Ted Diadiun, columnist:**

Ohio State University students back and forth ... fans to OSU and Blue Jackets games ... folks from Toledo and Columbus here for pro sports and other attractions ... shopping excursions both ways ... easy connections for business, relatives and friends in Columbus and Cincinnati ... what’s not to like? Gov. DeWine and friends should get off their butts.

**Thomas Suddes, editorial writer:**

Yes, Ohio would be making a huge mistake if it turns its back on this money, although any Ohio rail plan needs to include a Youngstown spur.

**Eric Foster, columnist:**

I think a lot of Ohioans (and Americans, in general) would support the idea of expanding passenger rail. The societal benefits of more commuters using public transportation are clear. However, I don’t think a lot of people would themselves give up their car and rely on passenger rail. Thus, rail expansion is supply without demand.

**Lisa Garvin, editorial board member:**

With a multibillion-dollar Intel plant coming, connecting Ohio’s largest cities with high-speed rail seems like a no-brainer. State subsidies would surely come down as more people choose trains over cars or planes. Is it a gamble? Yes. But Ohio must be bold if we are serious about becoming an economic powerhouse. Take the money.

**Mary Cay Doherty, editorial board member:**

In 2019, Amtrak’s existing state-supported routes lost money overall. Meanwhile, according to a Cato Institute senior fellow, government rail subsidies per passenger mile were 34 times higher than those for highway and air travel. Amtrak has operated at a loss every year since 1971. Ohio should say, “No, thank you” to wasting \$9 million taxpayer dollars annually on this losing venture.

**Elizabeth Sullivan, opinion director:**

If Ohio turns its back on this moonshot investment, our state sadly will proclaim its eagerness to entrench itself as a backwater unwilling to do what it takes to keep young people here, see beyond tomorrow or capture the economic promise of a more connected and upgraded transportation system.