



Editorial Roundup: Ohio

April 4, 2022,

Editorial: Could Ohio lose out on tens of millions in federal passenger rail investments?

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.

Political Cartoons

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.

Youngstown Vindicator. April 1, 2022.

Editorial: Ohio must not allow Amtrak to slip away

Ohio may be in danger of missing out, if state officials do not get a little more excited about proposals for expansion of Amtrak service in the state. In May, the Federal Railroad Administration will finalize plans for an Amtrak expansion, after which states will have a chance to apply for pieces of the \$66 billion for passenger rail included in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

But, according to a report by cleveland.com, there isn't much enthusiasm for the idea.

"I think Ohio runs the risk of essentially getting left behind in the dust of other states," Stu Nicholson, executive director of All Aboard Ohio, a nonprofit that advocates for increased passenger rail service in the state, told a reporter.

"We're seeing other states starting to take advantage of the fact that there is this huge amount of money on the table. We're still waiting for Ohio to raise its hand."

According to Amtrak's expansion plan, released last year, investments in the Buckeye State could include a new service connecting Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton and Cincinnati; and an expansion of the service along existing routes in Northern Ohio. Cleveland and Cincinnati would be mini-passenger rail hubs. Columbus would have service for the first time in more than 40 years.

But as other states rally to prepare grant applications, Ohio officials shrug their shoulders.

Given Ohio's push to be attractive to major employers, and provide better resources for residents (particularly as private transportation evolves and gets more expensive), it seems a no-brainer to be actively seeking funding to partner with Amtrak on an expansion.

Should they continue not to understand that, state officials are in real danger of leaving Ohioans stranded while other states take advantage of an important opportunity.

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Toledo Blade. April 2, 2022.

Editorial: Strengthen, uphold Reagan Tokes Law

If the rights of crime victims mean anything in the Ohio justice system, the Ohio Supreme Court must uphold the Reagan Tokes Law. Efforts to expand and clarify that law should be welcomed in the General Assembly.

Victims too often remain forgotten in the justice system. The Tokes Law and similar efforts resolve to remember victims by preventing others from becoming victims of repeat offenders, and hardened criminals.

The law was named after Reagan Tokes, a woman from Monclova Township. The 21-year-old was brutally kidnapped, robbed, raped, and murdered by an offender in 2017. He'd already been convicted of attempted rape.

The killer had a record indicating he remained a danger to society, yet he was released. He was being monitored, but not in real time. It wasn't his monitor, but his DNA on a cigarette butt that led to his implication in the murder. The monitor confirmed his presence at the crime scene.

The law allows the state, in certain cases, to keep offenders behind bars for longer than their minimum sentences would require. It did that by bringing back indefinite sentences. A key indicator for that decision would be behavior in prison. If an offender can't behave behind bars, is releasing them at the start of their potential parole period a good idea?

No. It's that simple.

Why the Ohio Supreme Court would allow the law to be challenged in a case when state authorities from the Department of Rehabilitation and Correction hadn't yet decided to apply the law to the convict who filed the suit is astounding.

The court should uphold the law.

House Bill 166 would expand the Tokes Law to require that monitors restrict where the released offender can or cannot go. Violations would be reported by the device. The bill would also make sure parole officers' caseloads were reasonable to assist in catching violations. The bill would add costs to the state budget but saving lives of innocent victims is worth the price. There is no price that can replace the life of Reagan Tokes.

That bill has passed the House and should pass the Senate.

The Supreme Court should do the right thing and uphold every aspect of the Tokes Law. Justice isn't just about the cops and robbers.

The victims, too, deserve justice.

The court must remember Reagan Tokes and all victims of violent crime. Uphold the law named in her memory. Keep violent offenders where they belong. In Prison.

If they must be released, monitor them closely.

If the Ohio courts and justice system lets down victims, there is no justice.

Elyria Chronicle-Telegram. March 30, 2022.

Editorial: GOP mapmakers strike again

Well, that was a waste of time and money.

The Republican-dominated Ohio Redistricting Commission on Monday approved a fourth set of state legislative maps drawn by GOP mapmakers with no Democratic input.

This after Republicans and Democrats agreed last week to hire a pair of consultants at a cost of nearly \$100,000. The pair spent days working on a solution, only to be brushed off at literally the 11th hour.

Commission member and Ohio Senate President Matt Huffman, R-Lima, described the GOP maps as a "fail safe" necessary to meet the Ohio Supreme Court's midnight deadline for the commission to approve new maps.

As if the deadline were more important than getting maps that would pass constitutional muster.

Instead of waiting for the consultants, Republicans made a few tweaks to a third set of maps that four out of seven justices had rejected and sent them back to the court. The new maps suffered from the same problems as the previous three versions.

The court's majority, including Chief Justice Maureen O'Connor, a Republican, has repeatedly insisted that the maps need to reflect the state's political breakdown. That's what voters demanded when they approved an amendment to the Ohio Constitution in 2015 that was supposed to curtail gerrymandering.

Rather than follow the Constitution and the will of the people, Republicans keep coming up with reasons why they can't produce maps that aren't gerrymandered.

Some, such as issues of compactness, are indeed in the Constitution. Others, such as their demand that incumbent lawmakers be protected, are not.

Regardless, they're little more than convenient justifications that provide cover to the real goal: maximizing Republican power.

Democrats should be favored to win 46% of the seats, while Republicans should have the advantage in 54%. (The partisan breakdown reflects voter preferences in statewide elections over the past decade.)

On paper that's what happened, at least according to Republicans. The GOP said it gave itself a 54-45 advantage in House races and an 18-15 advantage in Senate races. The trouble comes when you consider that 17 House districts and seven Senate districts that Republicans consider Democratic are really tossups.

The most recent maps the court rejected had 19 such House districts and eight such Senate districts.

Technically, it's an improvement, but not by much. The bulk of the political risk still falls on one party.

Even Republican state Auditor Keith Faber, another of the seven commission members, recognized that the GOP maps, which he joined the two Democratic commission members in voting against, were problematic.

"I think that there's a decent chance that this map won't meet the court's test," Faber said. (He voted against the GOP map because he said he was concerned with how some communities were split.)

Not only that, the "fail safe" of Republicans' slightly tweaked maps wasn't even necessary.

Although the Democratic consultant had to leave at 5 p.m. Monday to catch a plane, the Republican consultant continued working with Democratic staffers to complete the project.

Not long after Republicans passed their maps, copies of the consultants' maps, which appeared to meet the political breakdown requirements, were distributed to the commission.

That was around 11 p.m., still before the midnight deadline. Republicans rejected them.

House Speaker Bob Cupp, R-Lima, who co-chairs the commission, said he was "not comfortable" with the consultants' maps, in part because of "egregious compactness issues."

All of this means there's a good chance the Supreme Court will once again reject the GOP maps, forcing the commission to try yet again.

That might even be the point. If Republicans can drag this out long enough, the state might have no choice but to use unconstitutional maps simply so an election can be held.

The tactic seems to have succeeded when it comes to congressional districts, which also are being challenged in court. On Tuesday, the Supreme Court set a briefing schedule that would make it impossible to get the most recent congressional maps approved in time for the May 3 primary. That leaves in place constitutionally suspect maps that overly favor Republicans.

In the meantime, the uncertainty has led Secretary of State Frank LaRose, another Republican commission member, to order county boards of election to leave state legislative races off the ballot for the May 3 primary.

That means a second primary, which would cost the state more than \$20 million, will likely be necessary. Unless someone pushes back the primary.

That makes the most sense, but the courts and Republican lawmakers have thus far refused to do so.

All of which means wasting even more time and money.

Marietta Times. April 4, 2022.

Editorial: Auditor's report shows work continues

Ohio Auditor Keith Faber last week released the results of his department's annual Ohio Single Audit of the state agencies that administered federally funded programs in fiscal year 2021. According to Faber's office, the audit netted 25 findings, four questioned costs totaling more than \$1.3 million, and two additional findings that included questioned costs for which amounts could not be determined.

If you are thinking that sounds like a lot, Faber's office said this year's audit actually included the lowest number of findings in five years. That is good news.

It is also good to see the kind of fine-tooth-comb oversight that can help Ohioans feel a little more comfortable about how their money is being handled.

Part of Faber's report highlighted a challenge that has made the past couple of years in state government even tougher.

"The combination of high claim volume, lack of effective internal controls, and the increase in imposter fraud negatively impacted the (Ohio Department of Job and Family Services') ability to keep up, creating a backlog of claims pending adjudication. The Department reported to the U.S. Department of Labor Unemployment Compensation overpayments totaling \$3.75 billion as of June 30, 2021. Of these total overpayments, \$474.6 million was identified as fraud and \$3.27

billion as non-fraud relating to regular unemployment as well as federal pandemic unemployment benefits.”

The auditor’s office seems to be on top of that, too.

Though there is always work to be done, and room for improvement, it is encouraging to know the work of state government is being carried out under such a watchful eye.