

# THE BLADE

## Transit to serve basic needs

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The Toledo Area Regional Transit Authority's riders are, general manager James Gee suspects, heavily transit dependent. That's either because they cannot afford anything else or because a disability makes them unable to use mainstream cars. If TARTA is nothing else, it is a service for these riders. If that's all it is, it should focus on serving those who most need it and doing so frugally.

For TARTA's users, the service is valuable — essential, if they have no other way to get where they are going. According to Mr. Gee, 60 percent of TARTA trips are commutes to or from work; 11 percent are for school; 8 percent for shopping, and 3 percent for medical purposes.

The bus, then, is a road to opportunities for people who, without it, would not have them. It can mean the difference between having a job and not having one.

Residents who rely on TARTA matter. But those who pay TARTA's property taxes but do not use its service should be considered too. So should others who, despite using TARTA occasionally, get less out of it than they pay into it in taxes. TARTA, including TARPS — its service for the disabled — only provides about 11,000 rides on a typical weekday, officials say.

### **PART I: What's TARTA's mission?**

TARTA riders too pay property taxes, indirectly and presumably in some cases directly. They also pay fares. And while a fare of \$1.25 may not seem like much to people who own nice new cars, to people who can only afford the bus, it's real money.

So both riders and nonriders have reason to want TARTA to be frugal. Yet the agency has an operating cost of \$6.50 per bus ride, versus a national average on buses of \$3.87, according to transit critic Randal O'Toole of the Cato Institute.

If TARTA is to be a social-service agency, it must look for ways to reduce its costs while providing better service to the people who most need it, even if that makes it less valuable to those with other options. TARTA is getting input on how to improve its service by hosting listening sessions, and it should continue to do so.

At one listening session, an attendee said that shift workers need service before and after current hours in order to get to early jobs or home from late ones. TARTA should address that. While all-night regular bus service in Toledo would be silly, TARTA should try to offer transportation to or from work to employees whose shifts begin or end when the buses are not running. That might mean a service like TARPS, where people could submit an application showing where and when they work and schedule door-to-door service in smaller vehicles for when they have to

commute outside regular TARTA hours. Or it might look more like one or two specially designed bus routes.

Similarly, if the taxpayers are paying for TARTA to make sure Toledo residents have access to jobs, surely that includes jobs in places where residents do not pay TARTA's property tax. Of course, TARTA cannot go everywhere, but it should be open to extending its routes to get the people it serves to jobs near its boundaries.

On the savings side, TARTA must consider getting rid of its indoor stations.

And if the agency's purpose is basic transit, it should consider reducing service during the day. Currently, Mr. Gee says, typical service in the city of Toledo between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. is every half hour. There, he says, TARTA seeks to provide service appealing to those with options.

If it's a social-service agency, that's not its job. It should focus on making sure everyone has at least basic transportation. That includes getting people to work, when they work, and where they work. It does not include, and frugality does not permit, competing for riders who have other good options.