

Subcommittee on Housing, Transportation, and Community Development (HTCD)

Thank you Madam Chair for this opportunity to testify regarding the bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and its impact on smaller transit systems.

I am testifying today as Chief Executive Officer of St. Cloud Metro Bus and also as President of the Minnesota Public Transit Association which includes transit systems throughout the state – urban, suburban and rural.

First, I would like to express our deep appreciation for the increased funding provided in the IIJA law. The 30% increase in formula funds as well as for programs like the Bus and Bus Facilities program will make a huge difference as transit systems continue to rebuild and serve a growing number of riders in the wake of the pandemic. The impact of this law for St. Cloud Metro Bus and other transit systems will be expanded, higher-quality transit service over the next 5 years. Knowing the level of funding we will have, allows all transit systems to plan efficiently and allows us to provide stable bus service to our customers.

I would also like to thank the Federal Transit Administration for its work in communicating with transit systems and working hard to get the money delivered as quickly as possible. Many of the transit system managers in Minnesota have participated in webinars and had questions answered by the detailed information provided by FTA. The NOFO already issued for the No-Low Emission Bus program allows transit systems the opportunity to apply for funds that will expand their fleets while protecting the environment. Metro Bus has been transitioning our fleet to low emissions CNG since 2014; we are proud to say we are now 90% CNG. With additional funding opportunities, such as the No-Low Emission program, in the next five years, our organization is planning to apply for funds to replace a large majority of our first CNG bus fleet, which will reach its useful life in 2026.

“ According to American Public Transit Association’s (APTA) calculation we will be getting additional 5307 formula funds. With this increase in funds, Metro Bus will be in better position to attract safe, reliable transit operators allowing us to maintain, and possibly expand, our service, as well as keep up with technological advances in the industry and the overall workforce moving into a new, post-pandemic world.

In rural areas of Minnesota, residents who ride our buses often have no other option for getting to important medical appointments, jobs, school, family events and to access services. For example, Betty in Worthington uses Community Transit to get to kidney dialysis, the hair salon and weekly shopping trips. Without this bus service, she would have a hard time living in her own home and would probably need to leave her community to live in a larger city that had transit service available. Unfortunately,

Community Transit has limited service hours and capacity to meet all of the needs of residents in the 9 county service area that it covers.

We appreciate the focus of IIJA on providing resources to underserved areas. Smaller communities struggle to pay for weekend or evening service but residents need to get to important destinations after 4 or 5 in the afternoon. As decisions are made about allocating discretionary dollars provided through the IIJA we urge the FTA to follow through on prioritizing areas that currently leave many people without the level of transit service they need.

Rural communities also struggle to generate funding to meet local match requirements to access state and federal funds. We applaud your work Madam Chair, along with Senator Rounds, to pass the Investments in Rural Transit Act to reduce the need to charge local residents more in order to access additional transit resources in areas with lower densities and lower incomes.

The new law's focus on modernizing the fleet is very important. Many of our systems in Minnesota find themselves running buses with over 250,000 miles due to the difficulties in purchasing new buses. As systems struggle to keep older vehicles operating, the maintenance costs increase while dependability decreases. Any assistance that can be provided in helping systems purchase new vehicles would make a big difference in the impact that the IIJA will have in the short-term in improving transit service.

Another important issue for smaller transit systems in the implementation of this law is technical assistance. Rural systems with a small number of staff have a hard time dealing with new reporting or planning requirements and developing funding applications without some additional technical assistance. Some systems in Minnesota have been successful in securing competitive funding for new buses or facilities in the past, but most systems are stretched thin and do not have the capacity to carefully track all funding opportunities and effectively compete for new funding.

Any resources that can be provided to help smaller systems apply for a variety of funding sources would be greatly appreciated.

The additional, stable funding provided by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act will allow smaller transit systems to plan and deliver more frequent, higher-quality bus service to more residents and more communities. As the new law is implemented, we urge federal agencies to focus on better service for communities with little no service and to work closely with smaller transit systems to reduce the burden of regulations, reporting requirements, matching funding requirements and the level of work needed to apply for discretionary federal transportation funds. Investing in the mobility of rural residents will provide a strong return as people are able to remain in their own homes living independent, productive lives and contributing to their local communities.

Volunteer Drivers

In Minnesota, volunteer drivers provide 168,000+ rides each year for older adults and other non-drivers, giving them access to healthcare and other essential community services and products. Organizations with volunteer driver programs serve more than 77,000 people each year and drivers cover more than 9.5 million miles. Volunteer driver programs provide critical transportation for people as well as transport for meals and other products, including donated organs. The IRS-approved mileage reimbursement rate of just 14 cents for volunteer drivers is a significant barrier to recruiting and retaining volunteers.

MPTA urges you to increase the federal reimbursement rate for volunteer drivers to match the rate set by the IRS for business mileage.

The Mobile Vaccination Bus Project

Transit systems jumped into action when the COVID-19 pandemic hit to provide new services in their communities. In Minnesota, food delivery services using transit buses helped many families and seniors to receive food without having to travel to stores, keeping at-risk people safe.

Another initiative was using buses to get more COVID vaccines to more people. During the duration of the Mobile Vaccination Bus Project, a partnership of organizations including the Minnesota Department of Health, the Minnesota Department of Transportation, and Metro Transit hosted **272** events and administered **7,082** vaccines to community members. Additionally, **94%** of community partners who completed post event surveys reported that the Mobile Vaccination Bus Project provided COVID-19 vaccines to people who otherwise would not have had access.

The MDH Mobile Vaccine Bus Project was centered on bringing COVID-19 vaccines to communities of focus, many of which have historically faced barriers to healthcare. Based on post event survey data, more than half of mobile clinics served African American and Latinx communities, and more than a third served Persons with Disabilities.

Additionally, the Mobile Vaccination Bus Project was committed to reaching communities in all geographic settings in Minnesota, making stops in urban, suburban, and rural communities. In total, the buses visited **111** zip codes and **42** different counties in the state.

CDL Licensing for Transit Drivers

Hiring and retaining bus operators remains a major challenge for many transit systems. One of the problems we have faced in Minnesota is the lack of facilities and staff to administer road tests for drivers to acquire a commercial drivers license. St. Cloud Metro Bus benefits from having access to CDL licensing services within our system. We are working to secure authority to provide this training and testing to other transit systems in Minnesota. Long wait times for CDL testing and the high demand for drivers with a CDL license has proved to be a big barrier to many transit systems in maintaining and expanded local service.

Customer testimonials

Minnesota Valley Transit Authority Customer Patrick is an elderly gentleman who no longer drives. His son was unable to continue to transport him to and from work at Walmart in Apple Valley due to scheduling conflicts. Patrick has expressed gratitude for our Connect service as he would not be able to get to his job without it.

The Legends of Apple Valley is a senior living complex serviced by our Connect buses. Initially one resident reached out for transportation assistance for daily tasks such as doctor appointments or small shopping trips. She enjoyed the service so much that she spread the word to her neighbors in the apartment complex. Soon we were receiving a wide variety of calls from Legends of Apple Valley residents requesting assistance in setting up the app so they could schedule their own rides.

Customer testimonials- cont'd

Rochester, Minnesota, is home of the world-renowned Mayo Clinic, and also home to Rochester Public Transit (RPT)—a robust public transit service serving three key customer types: a large number of commuters into a dense urban core, a growing number of passionate “choice-riders,” and a diverse group of transit-reliant customers from all walks of life. RPT operates 32 fixed routes 365 days a year, and a complimentary paratransit service for persons with disabilities. Rochester is also currently in the process of seeking federal Small Starts funding to build the first bus rapid transit line in Greater Minnesota.

Recently a local educator shared her perspective on the role Rochester Public Transit plays in supporting the Rochester Community. Karen Cook is the Outreach, Volunteers, and ESL Navigator for the Adult and Family Literacy Program in the Rochester Public School district.

“At the Hawthorne Education Center in Rochester, Minnesota, I work with Adult Basic Education students who are seeking education to better their lives through English as a Second Language (ESL), General Educational Development (GED) classes and testing, college preparation courses, Citizenship, and more.

The majority of these students have barriers and challenges that have impacted their educational journey. By educating students about how to use Rochester Public Transit, the local bus service, I am helping them to overcome one of those barriers.

Students have shared with me the independence they now feel after practice transfers, feeling confident in reading a route schedule, and making it possible to live more independently by navigating to school, work, and appointments.

One such student is Amina, a new US Citizen. She is able to use public transportation to go to work and school; she was no longer dependent upon family members to take her where she needs to go. She is enjoying her freedom as a new citizen as well as independence to navigate the city.

Marcus, who is working to complete his GED, is better able to attend school while working because he is able to study while riding the bus. He can make the most of his opportunities to improve his life. His attendance is better in the classroom because of this.

Because they are students at Hawthorne, they are eligible to purchase a student rate pass for a great reduction which adds to the great benefit of public transit by making it more affordable.”