Younger leaders taking reins in Columbus & looking at rail

New city leaders were sworn in just after the first of the year in Columbus. Before the month was over, they were already starting to look at ways to improve public transportation and rail transit as an economic development initiative for Central Ohio.

Columbus and surrounding areas are facing a population increase of 500,000 residents by 2050. Accommodating their movement within the region in a cost-effective, inclusive and environmentally sensitive way that maximizes the economic return is paramount.

Columbus is the largest city in North America without any passenger rail (ie: Amtrak intercity trains, regional commuter trains, urban light-rail, etc.). Several recent attempts at developing passenger rail transit were halted by local or state officials. But those efforts could be revisited; new ones could be pursued at any time.

"Is that the answer?" City Council President Zach Klein asked in a recent interview by Columbus Business First.

"What is the cost for that? What would a system look like after we approach state and federal funding and we're able to knock that off the total price tag? How much are we willing to put out of our pocket to make that happen? Those are all conversations that I think we're ready to have before we kind of make the commitment. But I think we're ready to have those conversations as a community," Klein said.
Although falling gas prices barely made a dent in Amtrak ridership in 2015 (dropping to 30.8 million passengers from 30.9 million in 2014), freight rail traffic has taken a harder fall in the past year.

Rail freight traffic had been growing strongly in recent years to the point where the railroads were almost in meltdown in 2014. Since then, carload traffic has been on a steady slide, declining 1% to 5% each month. Intermodal traffic (containers/trailers) has held steady, though.

Declining energy-related traffic (coal, natural gas fracking materials, etc.) is only part of the story. Domestic manufacturing (except for autos) is declining too. Railroads are responding by making budget cuts and reducing service over many routes while idling others (like the Columbus, OH-Charleston, WV line).

Norfolk Southern (NS) saw its profits drop 25% and has fought off a hostile takeover by rival Canadian Pacific. In response, NS will cut 1,200 of its 29,000 jobs by year's end and another 800 jobs by 2020.

NS in 2014 detoured some freight off its busy Chicago Line across northern Ohio to reduce delays, including to Amtrak's daily Chicago-East Coast passenger trains. But now NS may reconsolidate its rail traffic. NS plans to dispose of or downgrade 1,500 miles of secondary lines by 2020 as traffic is rerouted onto higher-density lines. Or, some parts of its rail system are more economically operated in collaboration with short-line rail carriers, according to NS.

Amtrak’s Cardinal via Cincinnati may also be affected by declining freight traffic but in a positive way. Freight congestion in Indiana and Virginia has been cited as a barrier to expanding the Cardinal from thrice-weekly to daily. However, others are worried that some rail lines might no longer be maintained to passenger train standards and force passenger trains to detour over more freight-congested and delay-prone rail corridors.

Toledo has new transit & rail committees

The Toledo Metropolitan Area Council of Governments (TMACOG), one of 17 agencies in Ohio that distribute federal transportation and air-quality funds for metro areas, is creating a new Public Transit Committee. It will consist of members from the Transportation Advisory Committee and the public transit side of the Public Transit & Passenger Rail Committee, plus new members. Passenger rail will now have its own committee.

The Transportation Advisory Committee was originally created as a result of the Toledo Area Partnership Project Grant, which established a committee with the purpose of advancing the interests of public transit consumers. The committee has existed in this capacity since 2013.

In January, the Transportation Advisory Committee met to discuss integrating and expanding its efforts in order to become the new Public Transit Committee, a standing committee of TMACOG. Members in attendance agreed that this move would give them a stronger voice within TMACOG.

As a subcommittee of the Transportation Council, the Public Transit Committee will have representation within the Council, joining with the ranks of other standing committees such as the Freight Advisory Committee, the Pedestrian and Bikeways Committee, the Passenger Rail Committee, and the Transportation Planning Committee. These are all comprised of Toledo-area citizens.

If you would like to serve on the Public Transit Committee (or the Passenger Rail Committee) you should contact:

Rebekka Apardian
TMACOG Transportation Planner
(419) 241-9155 ext. 117
apardian@tmacog.org

Interested persons are encouraged to attend the first meeting of the Public Transit Committee to be held at 2:30 p.m. Feb. 24 in TMACOG’s board room at MLK Plaza, 300 Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, Suite 300. MLK Plaza also has the Amtrak station, just south of downtown Toledo.

The next Passenger Rail Committee will meet at 2:30 p.m. Feb. 17 at the same location listed above.
Cleveland-area transit developments on track

While plans by the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority (GCRTA) for a 25-cent fare increase and 1.5% service reduction may be delayed, public hearings are likely in March.

However, a public meeting on the proposed Red Line/HealthLine extension is scheduled at 6-8 pm Feb. 11 at the Collinwood Recreation Center, 16300 Lake Shore Blvd.

An extension of either the Red Line or HealthLine to Euclid is unlikely absent significant additional local and state funding. GCRTA already has a nearly $600 million backlog of unfunded state-of-good-repair needs.

If GCRTA can’t be expanded to new ridership sources, then ridership needs to be brought to GCRTA via Transit Oriented Development (TOD).

The Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency (NOACA) is leading a Regional TOD Scorecard & Implementation Plan, an outgrowth of the multi-county Vibrant NEO 2040 plan.

Phase 1 of NOACA’s TOD project is the development of a TOD scorecard and typologies, the design of a regional TOD program and development of an Age-in-Place Strategy. Phase 1 is estimated to take 6 months.

Phase 2 of the project includes development of an implementation plan for one or two of the rail stations, transit centers or priority bus corridors that are identified in Phase 1. This phase is estimated to take 6-7 months and will include a public engagement strategy to ensure that equitable TOD principles are being incorporated.

All Aboard Ohio in 2014 identified $5.5 billion in development near Cleveland transit stations.

Streetcar urbanism taking root in Cincinnati

Before Cincinnati Streetcar revenue service has even begun, up to $500 million in spin-off development is occurring along the streetcar’s 3.3-mile route. The development is comprised of both rehabilitated historic buildings as well as new construction—all in a pedestrian-oriented manner that supports neighborhood-scale transit usage.

Spinoff investment already represents a 3.8-to-1 return on the $136 million public investment in the streetcar that will begin service by late-summer.

The transit-oriented development is turning once-underutilized sections of the Over-The-Rhine district into vibrant, populated areas, in preparation of the low-mileage lifestyle the streetcar will offer.

Such progress was hard to imagine at the start of the century, following the 2001 defeat by voters of a regional light-rail levy. Advocates said it was important to first build a starter light-rail line (the Cincinnati Streetcar infrastructure was built to light-rail standards) to provide a real-world, localized example of rail transit and its benefits.

A similar approach was taken in Denver, where a starter rail line blossomed into a 122-mile network. The Cincinnati Streetcar is the by-product of a grassroots citizens effort which had to fend off multiple fear-based attempts to stop the project.

Cincinnati will provide a tangible example of rail transit’s benefits not only to the rest of its metropolitan region but also to other Ohio cities. We urge you to see it for yourself!
Reminders: AAO dues renewals & board seats

All Aboard Ohio thanks members who have renewed their dues thus far. We are especially grateful to those of you who have renewed at the maximum levels and even higher!

For those who haven't been able to renew yet, there's still time! You can renew online [HERE](https://www.allaboardohio.org) or by mailing a check (seniors/students: $25, On Board: $35, First Class: $50, or Club Car: $100) payable to “All Aboard Ohio” at 230 West Huron Road, #85.53, Cleveland, OH 44113.

Also, it's not too late to submit your name as a candidate for the All Aboard Ohio Board of Directors. The deadline is Feb. 20.

All seats are up for election at the Annual Meeting in even-numbered years – or May 21, 2016. The meeting will be at 10 a.m. at Spaghetti Warehouse, 397 W. Broad St., Columbus.

All candidates must be in good standing (ie: their membership dues current), be able to attend at least half of the monthly meetings (usually held by teleconference) and live in the region of the seat for which they are seeking. There are four regional directors – Southwest, Northwest, Northeast and Central-Southeast. The four regions are basically Ohio's old telephone area codes (513, 419, 216 and 614). In addition, there are 11 at-large directors seated by anyone residing anywhere within Ohio.

Any member in good standing can declare his or her candidacy for an office by sending a notice of candidacy along with a written statement not to exceed 75 words as to why the candidate desires to be elected, to the All Aboard Ohio Election Committee, 230 West Huron Rd. #85-53, Cleveland, OH 44113, prior to Feb. 20, 2016.

The election committee will verify that the candidate meets the requirements of office, has complied with the bylaws, and shall cause the name of the member to be added to a mail ballot. The first 75 words of the statement written by each candidate will be printed as-is on the ballot.

Illustration of the month

**Fewer Drivers Among Younger Generations in America**

Proportion of licensed drivers in 1983 and 2014, by age

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<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
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Down 21.7 percentage points since 1983

Down 24.9

Down 20.3

Down 18.3

Down 15.1

Down 10.5

Down 9.9

Down 7.9

Down 3.1

Down 2.9

Down 0.2

Up 3.6

Up 3.3

Up 12.2

Up 24.6

Source: University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute
Credit: Katie Park/NPR