

October 1, 2024

Senate Transportation Committee – Optimizing Pennsylvania’s Multimodal Transportation System

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Good morning, my name is Tim Geibel, and I am the Executive Director of the Crawford Area Transportation Authority (CATA) based in Meadville. I would like to start by recognizing Chairman Langerholc and Minority Chairman Flynn along with the entire committee for your leadership and commitment to supporting public transportation in rural communities and our need for predictable, growing investments to support rural transit.

Our name as the Crawford Area Transportation Authority has become a little outdated due to our transformational growth over the past 8 years as we are now the public transportation provider for over 2,300 square miles and a population base of over 170,000 residents in the counties of Crawford, Venango and as of this past July 1st, Clarion County. We are an organization of over 125 individuals, 90 vehicles and an annual operating budget in excess of \$9,000,000.

We provide traditional fixed route services in the communities of Meadville, Franklin, and Oil City along with our regional fixed routes branded as “lifeline” routes that provide a minimal level of access to healthcare and human service needs for the outlying communities of Saegertown, Conneaut Lake, and Cochranton with service into Meadville. We provide limited public shared ride services and Medical Assistance Transportation throughout the entire 3-county region with medical assistance trips to Dubois, Erie, Pittsburgh, and many other destinations. Collectively, we provide just under 1,000 passenger trips per day to a truly transit-dependent population.

We have invested in strategic initiatives to expand services all the while working on targeted cost savings measures. Specifically, we have pursued and successfully implemented regionalization by incorporating Venango County into our authority and we are one of the few transit providers that operate on propane autogas for our paratransit fleet. We estimate over \$13,000 of annual fuel savings per vehicle operating propane autogas versus gasoline. With 20 propane buses in our fleet, we save over \$250,000 annually that can be reinvested into our workforce and operations.

We have seen transformational impacts to the community of Titusville when we replaced underperforming fixed route and shared ride with the CATA Go micro transit service in July 2023. We have realized over a 110% increase in trips provided along with expanded evening and weekend hours thanks to micro transit. We currently provide on average 115 trips per day with an average wait time of less than 9 minutes between the time a trip is requested and the time the van arrives. A trip to the grocery store in Titusville that used to take over 3 hours riding and waiting for fixed route can now be completed, round trip, in

under 45 minutes, thus returning over 2 hours of time and immeasurable dignity to our riders who no longer feel isolated from their community. Based on comparative data, our costs to provide 1 trip in Titusville have decreased by 36% from \$26.40 to \$16.71.

We have also created a non-profit 501C3 organization called the Northwest Pennsylvania Mobility Alliance, Inc to help us with grassroot efforts to advance small scale mobility projects in the region. Through the non-profit we hold annual fundraisers that have afforded us the ability to bring public bikeshare to Meadville where residents can access bikes through a smartphone app to use as a means of transportation around town and gain additionally new access to recreational trails. This initiative has introduced the CATA brand to a segment of the population that does not currently use transit. We have successfully negotiated the first bikeshare agreement to operate within a state park and are currently in our second year of operation of the Lake Wilhelm bikeshare program in conjunction with Maurice K. Goddard State Park in Mercer County. Our non-profit fundraising has allowed us to award small grants for free fixed route bus passes to low-income individuals and provide grants back to CATA to offset costs associated with our micro transit service.

Despite all the success we have seen, there is another side to our story. It is a side of delayed grant approvals, unpredictability in discretionary federal operating funds, calling in lines of credit and more. Today, October 1st, we have 2 active lines of credit just to keep us in operation. We had to access a line of credit to pay for 11 paratransit vehicles delivered this past spring as we await capital grant payments from the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT). This process with the Department for a grant approval began in December of 2022 with the receipt of a “pre award authority” letter from the Department that allowed us to execute vehicle purchase orders under the statewide paratransit contract.

On the operating side, as of last week we maintained approximately 3 weeks of deficit reserve coverage resulting in having to access over \$200,000 on our operating line of credit just to ensure that we can meet payroll later this week. On September 30th we received correspondence that our July through September State grants from the Section 1513 program will be paid to CATA on October 2nd. These delays in capital and operating payments put a significant strain on our ability to plan, budget and maintain operations.

Statewide each of Pennsylvania's 67 counties are served by public transportation. Rural transit provides access to healthcare, social services, jobs, and basic human needs. Trips in Clarion or Conneaut Lake are just as important as trips in urban centers. Every ride matters.

As an industry we support the Governor's call for increased investments in public transportation and are appreciative of the additional one-time funding increase approved with this year's budget. Without additional state investment and increased fiscal predictability, we will face gaps and shortages in rural and urban areas alike. While the impacts of our challenges are as varied as the regions we serve, every transit provider will experience fiscal challenges.- CATA's fiscal cliff occurs every June 30th as we continually have no guidance of discretionary federal operating funding until we receive notice of a grant agreement which in 2023 occurred in mid-July and this year did not occur until the second week of August. For both FY23/24 and our current year FY24/25 our Board of Directors were unable to adopt a

final budget until well after the start of the new fiscal year due to uncertainty in federal discretionary funding.

Despite our efforts to become more efficient, we cannot meet the evolving needs of our communities without increased state investments and without a better structure in place for the rural systems related to how we access and are awarded federal discretionary operating funds. I would like to thank Senators Laughlin, Langerholc, Flynn and the entire Pennsylvania Senate for your vision and leadership in unanimously passing Senate Bill 597 earlier this session.

Senate Bill 597 is critically necessary for rural transit providers to have the desperately needed predictability in discretionary federal operating grants and increased local control with capital planning that would allow us to meet the ever-changing needs of our communities as dictated by local decision making. Senate Bill 597 advances priorities that would modernize the management of public transportation by enhancing predictability and timely drawdown of the discretionary federal 5311 funding that is awarded to our Commonwealth each year from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA). When coupled with much needed predictability in state capital funding, Senate Bill 597 would greatly improve public transit throughout the Commonwealth and help rural transit providers better meet the needs of their communities.

At CATA, we have identified many unmet needs throughout our service area that we hope to advance with additional and predictable funding. Specifically, we have been working in partnership with Crawford County Commissioners, Venango County Commissioners, the Venango County United Way, and others on a lifeline route connection between Titusville and Oil City. Our public surveys have shown us that there is a significant need for residents in Oil City to access human services and medical appointments in Titusville. We are currently working on plans to bring two day per week service to connect these communities under our lifeline fixed route model.

The community of Cambridge Springs, with a population of 2,500 residents, is currently minimally served through our public shared ride services. This community is a food desert with no access to a local grocery store. Representative Kathy Rapp has encouraged us to find a way to provide affordable access for this community to get fresh food. To further hinder this community, the sole pharmacy recently closed forcing residents to travel more than nine miles to get their prescriptions. These are significant detriments to the social health of this community. Under the current shared ride model, a senior citizen would have to pay \$8.00 round trip to access fresh food or pick up a prescription. An adult that does not qualify for subsidy, would pay \$53.30 round trip. Neither of these options are feasible.

Through our internal planning, it would cost CATA approximately \$110,000 per year to provide six hours of public service, two days per week to this community with our CATA Go, micro transit model. Although this is far from ideal, it would add real, meaningful value to the community and have significant impacts on the social determinants of health as we would be able to provide access to fresh food and medical prescriptions to the public. Under the micro transit model, these trips would be free for senior citizens and cost between \$4.00 - \$5.00

roundtrip for adults. We are currently trying to find enough money to begin this service in partnership with County Commissioners, the Meadville Medical Center, and our own nonprofit organization.

Rural transit is truly a life-line service. In December 2023, the Ohio Department of Transportation funded a study on the Social Return on Investment that assessed the community impacts to 9 rural counties. The report indicated that for every dollar invested into rural transportation, up to \$9.13 of social value was created. This social value can increase the ability for rural communities to age in place and see improved personal health outcomes.

I would like to end my testimony with a few examples of what rural transit means to our riders. I believe these examples will help us all stay connected to the communities we are privileged to serve.

There is the story of Melissa McGuigan in Meadville who shared with us that she “was diagnosed with epilepsy and CATA saved my life because I became unable to drive at an early age. I wouldn’t have voted if I didn’t have the bus.” There is the story of Richard Brannon of Oil City who says “I have been using CATA as my main source of transportation ever since I developed a form of multiple sclerosis (MS), so I take the bus to UPMC Seneca from my medical appointments. It’s reliable transportation that I can depend on. Finally, there is the story of Vickie Johnson from Cochranon who rides the lifeline route to Meadville and says, “it got too expensive to have a car, so I ride to Meadville and back when I have medical appointments, need to shop or visit my kids.”

I would like to thank the committee for your leadership in addressing the critical funding challenges we as an industry face and for the opportunity to provide testimony today.

Thank you. I am happy to answer any of your questions.