



ENVIRONMENTAL LAW & POLICY CENTER

Public Comments to Ohio Rail Development Commission

By Derrick James

Environmental Law & Policy Center

September 18, 2025

I am Derrick James, Senior Policy Advocate for the Environmental Law and Policy Center, ELPC. ELPC has a 35-year history of advocating for clean air, clean water, and the great places that make living in the Midwest so wonderful.

Air and water quality are affected by transportation-generated pollution. Providing modal choice, especially better public transportation and passenger rail, are solutions to deal with the issues that degrade the comfort, quality of life, and safety of our communities. Giving Ohio residents more transportation choice also increases system capacity at less cost to individuals and refocuses economic activity to station neighborhoods and historic downtowns. Also, a significant share of the population of Ohio and the Midwest are unable to access travel by car or air from their community either because of no service, disability, age, or lack of resources. All our neighbors deserve a transportation system that meets their needs.

The Ohio Rail Plan is a vision statement that should reflect the desires of the state's citizens and travelers. Ohio DOT's own studies show that 75% want better passenger trains. Just as the state plays a role in dedicating resources toward expansion and maintenance of roads, a resilient state transportation system should include investments to expand passenger rail.

Ohio is a top tier industrial state with sizable commercial, cultural, and educational centers. Ohio has large cities within distances that are great candidates for new passenger rail routes. Connecting metropolitan areas and intermediate rural communities with trains is not a new, untested concept. Ridership on intercity passenger trains is breaking records. Last year more than 35 million trips were taken on passenger trains in the U.S. This is more than have ridden on trains since the 1960s, when there were many more routes and the interstate system was not yet complete. People elsewhere are responding to improvements and riding trains.

This draft plan includes the projects desired by the freight railroads in Ohio. Why not include the plans and projects requested by communities and passenger railroads operating in Ohio? Amtrak Connect US took a high-level look at travel demand between cities that could be competitive for passenger trains, usually from 150 and 400 miles apart. Several such markets exist in Ohio: 3C & D; Cleveland-Toledo-Detroit and Chicago; Pittsburgh-Columbus-Lima-Chicago. Just as development of interstate highways was a partnership between the state and the Federal government, development of a 21st Century passenger rail network should also be the state's responsibility. Adjacent states are working to improve and expand passenger rail. Pennsylvania will be doubling train service between Pittsburgh, Harrisburg and Philadelphia. Michigan partners with Amtrak and the Feds on routes connecting 20 cities in that state like Detroit, Grand

HQ: 35 East Wacker Drive | Suite 1600 | Chicago, IL 60601

ELPC.org | (312) 673-6500

Manny Flores, Chair | Howard A. Learner, Executive Director

Illinois | Indiana | Iowa | Michigan | Minnesota | North Dakota | Ohio | South Dakota | Wisconsin | Washington D.C.





Rapids, Ann Arbor, Battle Creek, and East Lansing, with some routes having trains traveling as fast as 110 mph. Several states in the Midwest even cooperate between them on new and expanded services because they know the region's economic flows are across state lines. Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, and Missouri connect almost all their largest cities via passenger train routes.

Toledo has sought funding to improve their train station to prepare for service growth. Cleveland has plans to improve their North Coast district with a larger train station as one of the area's lynchpins. Oxford and Hamilton in Butler County want stations on an existing Amtrak route. The Federal Railroad Administration has completed a Congressionally mandated long distance rail study with two routes passing through Ohio. Why aren't these projects in the Ohio Rail Plan? Civic leaders and the public want service connecting Akron and Cleveland.

The draft plan states that several (4) proposed corridors are in early project planning stage so it's too early to identify capital projects. Several of the suggested corridors have been studied before, over and over, again and again, and have not advanced because of frequent political changes, not because of any change in route characteristics and market demand. Since the 1990s, The Ohio Hub Plan, the FRA's Midwest Rail Plan, the Midwest Regional Rail Plan, and Amtrak Connects US have identified the 3C&D and Cincinnati-Chicago routes as logical additions to the nation's passenger rail system. The string of communities across the states of Ohio and Indiana, including Columbus, Lima, and Fort Wayne, want new frequent passenger service. Ohioans are tired of waiting. Identify these and the other routes desired by local policymakers and your own survey respondents as priority routes and begin identifying discreet projects along those routes that benefit freight and passenger rail. Give local communities more assurance that their station area development projects have merit. Analyze funding mechanisms to support start-up and operations and identify economic benefits so legislators can begin to weigh project value as route planning continues.

Increased efficiency and reliable movement of people, enhanced public transportation and mobility, coordination with community visions, and improved public health, air quality and emissions are goals of the state rail plan. Passenger rail, if implemented, would advance these goals. ELPC stands ready to partner with you and other organizations to engage the public, state and federal policy makers to understand what is at stake and why building a quality passenger rail system is good for Ohio.

Thank you. I would be glad to answer any questions.

HQ: 35 East Wacker Drive | Suite 1600 | Chicago, IL 60601

ELPC.org | (312) 673-6500

Manny Flores, Chair | Howard A. Learner, Executive Director

Illinois | Indiana | Iowa | Michigan | Minnesota | North Dakota | Ohio | South Dakota | Wisconsin | Washington D.C.

