

PUBLIC TESTIMONY

OF

**Donna P. McNamee
Trustee**



BEFORE

**THE OHIO SENATE
FINANCE AND FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS COMMITTEE**

On

AMENDED SUBSTITUTE HOUSE BILL 1

May 20, 2009



The regional transit authority for Lake County
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Good Morning Chairman Carey, Vice Chairman Wagoner, and distinguished committee members. It is an honor and privilege to have time this morning to share with you why it is vitally important for the State of Ohio to adequately fund public transit services for the mutual benefit of the State of Ohio as well as people like me who are transit dependant and for whom public transportation services are literally our lifeline to economic freedom, choice, mobility and independence. Today, I hope to help you understand the significant impact of the cumulative cuts to public transit funding – since 2000 – on the lives of people with disabilities, senior citizens and low-income workers – who daily depend upon public transportation just to survive.

First I want to share with you some background information about my credentials and the transit system I represent.

I am currently serving my third term as a member of the Laketrans Board of Trustees. During my tenure I have had the privilege of serving as the Board's Vice President and also as its President. Additionally, I also serve as Chair of Easter Seals Project ACTION, based in Washington, DC.; Chair of the

American Public Transportations Association's (APTA) Transit Board Members ADA subcommittee; and was a member of ODOT's 21st Century Transportation Priorities Task Force.

Most importantly, I am a user of the Laketran system. Like many other citizens, with Laketran's help, I have been able to independently navigate my way around Lake County to:

- pursue self-employment opportunities.
- safely access the medical services I need.
- be active in our community – including being a major party candidate for the Ohio State Senate.
- I have been able to play a critical role in working for the enactment of a federal law that expanded opportunities for people with disabilities to become gainfully employed without losing health care coverage. When I sat next to the President of the United States at the bill signing ceremony, I realized that every support system I rely on – Laketran included – had a role in helping me make this landmark legislation a reality for the benefit of millions of people with disabilities nationwide.

The truth is I am like thousands of others in our community.

For people who daily confront physical or mental challenges or cannot drive safely, public transportation has been a Godsend.

Laketran has helped open doors of opportunity to many that otherwise would not have been possible.

Yet Laketran – like other small transit systems – and their riders are now at serious risk.

For small systems like Laketran that daily provide hundreds of thousands of demand response rides, the near decade long downward spiral in transit funding is approaching catastrophic levels.

Currently, as Laketran's General Manager has just detailed, for the first time in Laketran's 35-year history, we are preparing to significantly reduce service and increase fares. The significance of this action on a small system, dedicated by its mission to emphasizing service to seniors and persons with disabilities cannot be understated.

The State of Ohio's continuing disinvestment in public transportation has placed a disproportionate burden on small local transit systems to respond to growing service demands by a rapidly aging, more disabled and low income populations who require more public transit services simply to live and work independently in our communities.

Long before the ADA was enacted, Laketran embraced not only what came to be the letter but also the spirit of the law. Laketran successfully serves its customers with a standard of excellence envied by many public transit systems across our country. It is well recognized that Laketran runs one of the most efficient, cost effective, and customer friendly Dial-a-Ride

services in the nation. Rated in the top 10, it is the industry model for other small urban communities.

The benefits of public transit are daily witnessed in terms of increased freedom, choice, mobility and independence of senior citizens and people with disabilities who comprise 28% of Lake County's population and about one-third of our one million annual ridership. Forty-Four (44%) of our demand response rides are for work purposes. Thanks to Laketrans, we are able to live and work independently in the community – and not become a burden to the state. For example:

- Because of Laketrans, a 70 year old senior is able to work at McDonald's to supplement her meager social security.
- Because of Laketrans, a young woman who lives with a significant disability – who uses a wheelchair but cannot drive or be transported in an automobile – attended law school and is now an attorney.
- Because of Laketrans, an 85 year old man is able to visit his dying wife at a hospice each day in the last three weeks of her life.
- Because of Laketrans, for the first time in their marriage of many years, a couple – both wheelchair users – is able to celebrate a wedding anniversary outside of their home.
- Because of Laketrans, a developmentally disabled man is able to visit his critically ill father in the hospital.

- Because of Laketran, senior citizens who would otherwise be transportation captives in their homes are able to be gainfully employed and stay active at senior citizen centers in the community.
- Because of Laketran, people suffering from kidney disease are able to access dialysis centers for treatment.

Without Laketran and other systems' demand-response services, the ability of individuals like these to live independently – to survive in the community – is threatened. Already, some transit systems have reduced services and/or increased fares. The result is that Ohio's low income workers, senior citizens and people with disabilities are getting hurt. These transit dependent populations are being forced to remain in their homes, and can no longer access:

- jobs,
- health care services,
- schools,
- shopping
or
- recreation.

Why? Because they can no longer afford public transit services and/or demand-response service in their communities has been dramatically reduced, rendering them transportation captives in their homes.

During our public hearings last month, in anticipation of fare increases and service reductions to eliminate Saturday, holiday and evening service, we heard from many seniors, people with disabilities and low income workers whose lives will change dramatically for the worse and who will now be placed at risk in the community instead of remaining viable members.

- People will become more dependent upon state programs, relegated to survive in a lesser quality of life and existence.
- People will lose their jobs – difficult to come by in any economic circumstance for low income workers, seniors and people with disabilities, but impossible for these populations to replace under the current economic conditions.
- People who lose their jobs may also lose their homes.

Some specific examples include those for whom:

- Without Laketran's evening service, a businesswoman who is blind – yet wanted to remain self-sufficient and employed despite her personal circumstances – will be forced to close her dog training business simply because she has no transportation. Instead, she will be trapped in her home after 6 pm when most of her classes were held.
- Without Laketran's Saturday service, a mother reports that her adult son with MR/DD, employed via Community

Employment Services (CES) and requiring an accessible wheelchair lift equipped van for transportation, is going to lose his job because he can no longer work on Saturdays.

And of course my own...

- Without Laketran's Saturday and evening services, I will also lose work as a self-employed communications consultant *simply because I will be unable to be physically present when required to be.*

From my experience in working with other transit providers, I can tell you it is their desire to continue to provide outstanding service to their communities. But to do so we desperately need your help.

Please do not continue to perpetuate the ill conceived 'disinvestment in public transit cycle', in which transit systems have been mired since 2001, by not adequately funding public transportation services.

Please help us help senior citizens, people with disabilities and low income workers across Ohio. Our collective survival – as public transit providers for transit dependent populations who want and need to work – depends upon your action in staying the House increase in funding for state operating assistance for public transit to help get Ohio moving again!

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today; I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.