

Ending the Transit Death Spiral:

A Positive Vision For Public Transit
In Greater Cleveland



Clevelanders for
Public Transit



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Ending the Transit Death Spiral: A Positive Vision for Public Transit was written, reviewed, and designed by many vehement volunteers committed to frequent, affordable, accessible and equitable public transit in Northeast Ohio.

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Clevelanders for Public Transit would like to thank:

Everyone who dedicated their time and resources to Fair Fares: A Campaign for Better Transit. Thanks to you we can move past endless fare increases and service cuts towards the transit system we all deserve.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE TRANSIT DEATH SPIRAL is a cycle of financial crises at a transit agency where fare increases and service cuts result in continued ridership decline, which leads to more fare increases and service cuts. In the last 15 years, transit fares in Cuyahoga County have doubled while service has been cut over 25%. Cleveland is the poorest big city in the nation. Paying more money for less service isn't working.

Why should you care? Because world-class cities have world-class transit.

Our dependence on cars creates job sprawl. Our auto dependence pushes jobs further and further out, causing loss of population, tax revenue and longer commutes. Over 60% of jobs in Cuyahoga County are not accessible by transit. Our auto dependence requires massive space for parking. Cuyahoga County has more square feet of parking than housing. Owning a car costs thousands of dollars every year. Driving emits the largest share of greenhouse gases contributing to climate change.*

What kind of world will we leave for our children? Young professionals say public transit is our region's biggest challenge.† **A new vision is needed.**

Cuyahoga County desperately needs a 21st-century transportation system that is affordable, accessible, equitable, and safe. Our vision explains why and how to fund transit. Our vision outlines how transit ambassadors will make transit safer and speed up all trips by up to 20%. Our vision shows equitable transit-oriented development making a more-livable city. Our vision will improve transit for riders and make it an attractive option for everyone.

Having choices is freedom. We should not have to pay thousands of dollars to sit in traffic just to go to work or a ballgame. The time to reimagine transit is now. End the transit death spiral, and make Cleveland a world-class city for generations to come.

Join us in making this vision a reality.

* U.S. Department of Transportation. "Public Transportation's Role in Responding to Climate Change" (January 2010). Retrieved from: <https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/docs/PublicTransportationsRoleInRespondingToClimateChange2010.pdf>

† Kilpatrick, Mary. "Young professionals sound off on life in greater Cleveland" (September 12, 2019). Cleveland.com. Retrieved from: <https://www.cleveland.com/metro/2019/09/young-professionals-sound-off-on-life-in-greater-cleveland.html>

INTRODUCTION

What Transit Could Be

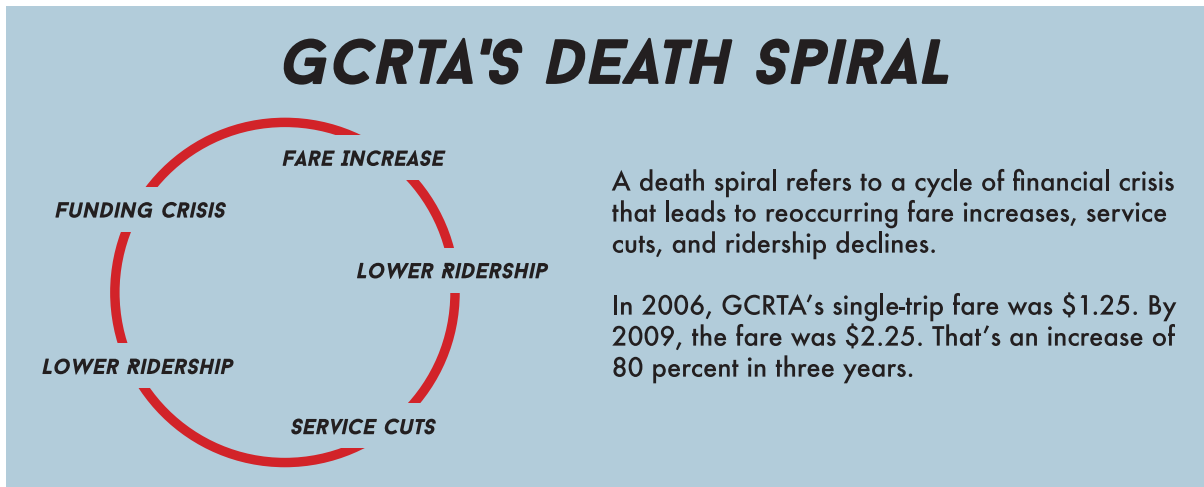
It's another snow storm in January in Northeast Ohio. Typically, you dread having to get the ice scraper out and shovel your car. You think about the slippery roads and hope that other drivers will drive safely knowing that motor vehicle crashes are a leading cause of death. Thankfully, you recently sold your car, saving yourself over \$9,000 a year.¹ So instead, you grab your coffee and walk a few minutes to the heated bus shelter near your house. The real-time display says the bus will arrive in a couple minutes (it comes every 5 minutes since new transit funding took effect last year). You talk to your neighbors as the bus pulls up. All its doors open and everyone gets on quickly, the doors close immediately, and the bus starts to move. You sit down and open your favorite magazine. Michelle, the transit ambassador, asks you how you are doing and scans your fare card (ambassadors conduct random checks a few times a month, it keeps the buses moving faster and they're always pleasant). In 20 minutes you arrive at work. You say goodbye to your neighbors, finish your coffee, close your magazine, and feel ready to start another day. You think about your co-worker in Lorain County who has no choice but to drive into work, and you hope they made it safely. Freedom to drive is not really freedom at all. Having transportation choices is freedom, while providing safety, comfort, and cost-savings.

What Transit is Now



You are freezing at the bus stop, the bus only comes every 30 minutes and it's late. You hope it will come soon so you don't miss your connection, but you have no idea if the connecting bus will be on time either (it often isn't). If you miss that bus you'll be waiting in the cold for another 30 minutes. The bus pulls up and the passenger ahead of you is a quarter short—they forgot that fares went up recently—so you are standing in the cold while they look for a quarter. The bus is full, and there is nowhere to sit. You are late to make your connection and run after the bus, but just miss it. You can't wait to buy a car as soon as you can afford one.

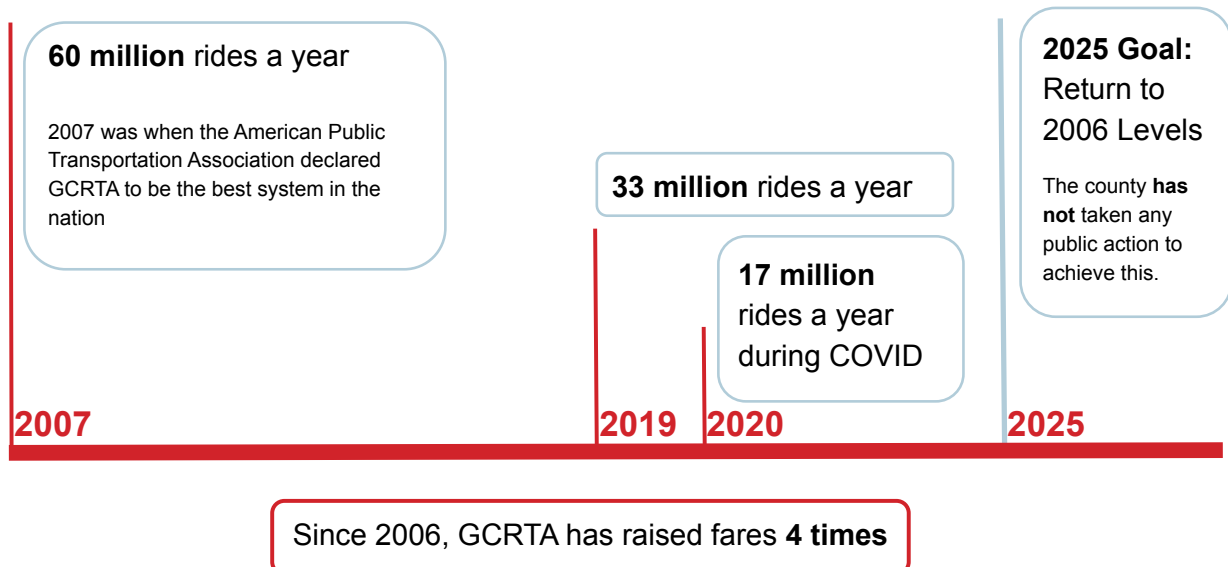
How We Got Here – The Transit Death Spiral



In the last 15 years, transit fares in Cleveland have doubled while service has been cut over 25%.² GCRTA riders today pay a larger share of their income for transit than nearly any other mid-sized city in the United States.³

In 2007, when the American Public Transportation Association declared GCRTA to be the best system in the nation, the agency provided 60 million rides a year.⁴ In 2019, GCRTA provided 33 million rides.⁵ In 2020, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, GCRTA provided 17 million rides.⁶ Since 2006, GCRTA has raised fares four times.⁷ Declining ridership is the logical result of decades of fare hikes and service cuts.

With fewer buses and higher fares, more people stop taking the bus. And as ridership falls and fare money disappears, GCRTA's budget goes further in the red, necessitating another round of fare hikes to balance the books. This is the Transit Death Spiral.



How Do We Make Transit Better?

World-class cities have world-class transit. Northeast Ohio needs transit that is safe, frequent, convenient and affordable. How can we make transit all it could be? Listen to the riders! Riders know what to do if you will work with us.

Bus Lines are Life Lines

Transit connects people to jobs, healthcare, friends, education, healthy food, and recreation. It benefits our entire community:

- Every dollar invested in transit generates \$5 in economic activity.⁸
- About two-thirds of jobs in Cuyahoga County are not accessible by a 90-minute transit trip.⁹
- Cleveland is the poorest large city in the nation.¹⁰ Investing in job access and transportation would have a very large reduction in poverty.¹¹
- Clevelanders pay 39% of their income towards housing and transportation while Washington DC residents only pay 33%. Our housing is much cheaper but owning a car is expensive.¹²
- Riders who commute on GCRTA rather than drive save a total of \$51.8 million per year.¹³
- Commuters who depend on GCRTA earn a total of \$485.8 million per year.¹⁴

A Typical Rider of GCRTA



Sex: Female

Age: Working age

Race: African American

Job: Employed full time, making < \$25,000 / yr

These benefits are essential for Northeast Ohio. The typical GCRTA rider is of working age, female, black, employed full-time, and makes less than \$25,000 per year. She is likely a front-line, essential worker. 5% of riders rely on GCRTA to get to medical appointments. 10-15% of riders are looking for work. For the 25% of Cleveland households without a car, public transit is an essential public service.

Cleveland schoolchildren also depend on GCRTA. Indeed, 25% of GCRTA riders are students and 77% of those are dependent on transit service. Without it, the lives of more than 16,000 students would be irreparably hurt.¹⁵



A New Day for Transit Since CPT's "Fair Fares" Platform

Clevelanders for Public Transit is an organization made up of riders who believe in safe, accessible, affordable, reliable, and sustainable public transit for Clevelanders.

CPT published our Fair Fares platform in February 2018 amid multiple fare hikes and service cuts. We provided alternatives to stop the transit death spiral and make transit better. Since Fair Fares was published, CPT has won significant improvements to transit in Cleveland. But there are still critical reforms that are needed now more than ever.

CPT wins at GCRTA:

- Reversed a 25-cent fare increase previously approved by the Board of Trustees in August 2018, saving riders \$1.5 million each year.
- Conducted "System Redesign" and "Fare Equity" studies
- Reduced the cost of all-day passes by 50 cents in October 2020, saving riders over \$1.3 million each year.
- Implemented a bus network redesign in June 2021, connecting 167,000 more people to high-frequency transit, a 100% increase.
- Included regional, open fare payment, and fare capping to be included in a future fare collection system
- Joined NEORide, a step towards more regional collaboration with other transit agencies.

Still needed:

- Transit ambassadors for rider safety and constitutional fare enforcement.
- Restore all-door boarding and proof-of-payment fares on the HealthLine and expand to other lines.
- Decriminalize fare evasion at the state and local level.
- Expand local sources of transit funding.
- Reduced fares for low-income riders.
- Restore on-board cash transfers and standardize transfers across fare payment methods.

With recent changes on the board of trustees and a new CEO, leadership at GCRTA has changed significantly since CPT first published Fair Fares. After the completion of 5 pillar studies, the agency has a new strategic plan to guide it through 2030. This platform exists to recenter riders and the need to restore and expand transit now.

SAFETY IS ESSENTIAL: REIMAGINING PUBLIC SAFETY

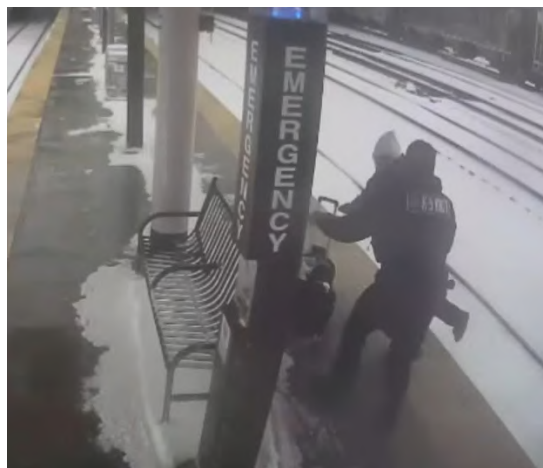
Fear of police is common among transit riders in Cleveland. In 2021, GCRTA Transit Police made headlines for “shoving man, slamming him to ground”¹⁶ while another incident involved “shoving a mentally-ill man off the rapid platform” onto live tracks.¹⁷ Police do not prevent crime and do not address its root causes such as poverty, homelessness, mental health, and substance use. It is past time to reimagine what it means to provide safe transit.

RTA police officer fired after shoving man, slamming him to ground at Cleveland rapid station

Updated Mar 05, 2021; Posted Mar 05, 2021

Video shows RTA officer shove mentally-ill man off Cleveland rapid platform onto tracks

Updated Apr 06, 2021; Posted Apr 06, 2021



On February 16, 2021, an RTA transit cop pushed a 68 year-old mentally-ill man off of a Rapid platform onto live rail tracks.

Transit Ambassadors

CPT has been calling for civilian transit ambassadors ever since GCRTA's proof-of-payment fare enforcement by police was ruled unconstitutional in 2017.¹⁸ The agency's refusal to act inconveniences riders who just want to get to their doctor's appointment, job interview, or to see a friend.

GCRTA employs 30 fare enforcement officers¹⁹, a position created to police fare evasion on the HealthLine and Red Line. Yet, more than three years after this policing was declared unconstitutional, GCRTA still spends \$1.8 million per year on police enforcement of its fare policy.²⁰ After the court ruling, the number of citations dropped dramatically. Yet, those 30 officers still draw salaries, draining precious resources that should be going to improve service for riders.

GCRTA must eliminate its wasteful, unconstitutional fare enforcement unit and create a transit ambassador program to replace it. Civilian transit ambassadors are helpers. They can:

- act as ambassadors and another set of eyes on the ground.
- check fares and explain the fare payment system to new riders.
- perform station audits to keep shelters and stations clean with up-to-date information.
- work with community intervention specialists for individuals experiencing crisis, homelessness, mental health, and substance use.
- be a friendly face for GCRTA.

And transit ambassadors can do this without the threat of a gun. For many riders, any contact point with a police officer is traumatic. Transit ambassadors and community intervention specialists replace those contact points of trauma with contact points of care. They should be public employees, paid a living wage with benefits, and members of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 268.

Basic Police Facts

Clevelanders for Public Transit has joined in coalition with Black Spring CLE to demand that city and county governments abolish the overlap in policing in Northeast Ohio. In Cleveland alone, there are over a dozen police departments operating, both public and private.

The GCRTA Transit Police Department is fourth largest in Cuyahoga County with 155 employees, including 148 officers and seven K-9 units. As a comparison, in Pittsburgh, the Port Authority of Allegheny County has double the ridership of GCRTA²¹ but only 47 officers on its entire transit police force.²² GCRTA's bloated police department costs the agency more than \$14 million per year²³ that should be used to operate more routes and more frequent service.

Armed Fare Enforcement Ruled Unconstitutional

In the summer of 2017, Ronnie Williams wanted to ride the HealthLine. He attempted to buy a ticket from a vending machine at Superior and Euclid. The machine was broken, so Mr. Williams boarded without a ticket. He paid his fare on the bus, but GCRTA fareboxes do not print any proof-of-payment for one-way fares.

Two GCRTA cops started checking every rider's ticket. When Mr. Williams could not produce one, the cops pulled him off the bus and cited him for fare evasion. Now Mr. Williams found himself facing the possibility of 30 days in jail and a \$250 fine because the ticket machine wasn't working.

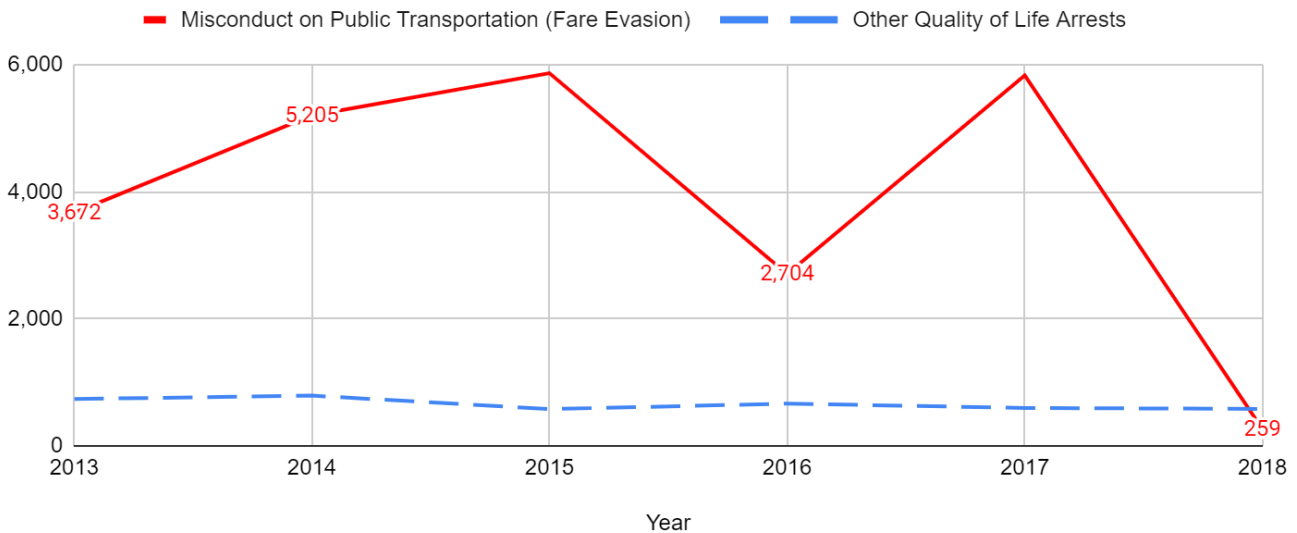
TRANSIT POLICE DEPARTMENT STAFFING				
Grade	Job Name	2019	2020	2021
01	0139 Security Officer	1.0	1.0	1.0
02	0239 Dispatcher Transit Police	9.0	9.0	9.0
04	0440 Transit Police Officer	84.0	84.0	84.0
	0440 Transit Police Fare Enforcement Officer	20.0	20.0	20.0
	0454 PT Transit Police Fare Enforcement Officer	10.0	10.0	10.0
05	0540 Transit Police Sergeant	17.0	17.0	17.0
23	0725 Executive Secretary	1.0	1.0	1.0
25	1085 District Business Analyst	1.0	1.0	1.0
26	1665 Security Systems Specialist	4.0	4.0	4.0
27	1060 Lieutenant	3.0	3.0	3.0
28	0840 Manager Security Systems	1.0	1.0	1.0
29	1248 Commander	3.0	3.0	3.0
30	1511 Director Security/Chief of Police	1.0	1.0	1.0
	Total	155.0	155.0	155.0

Mr. Williams decided to fight the citation in court. Cleveland Municipal Court Judge Emanuella Groves eventually agreed with him. She ruled that while every person must pay their fare, that does not obliterate their constitutional protection against unreasonable searches and seizures. In essence, Judge Groves held every person has the right to ride the bus or train in peace and without police disturbance.

Mr. Williams found himself facing the possibility of 30 days in jail and a \$250 fine because the ticket machine wasn't working.

GCRTA's response to the ruling was to shift fare enforcement to bus operators, which immediately slowed every trip, reduced reliability, and caused riders to miss connections. This decision has effectively eliminated the increased speed allowed by all-door boarding (available only on the HealthLine). CPT estimates that GCRTA's suspension of proof-of-payment on the HealthLine costs the agency at least \$20,000 per month in additional operating expenses.

Since Proof-of-Payment Fare Enforcement by Transit Police was Declared Unconstitutional in Late 2017, Citations Have Dropped Over 90%



As an alternative to fare enforcement performed by armed cops, Judge Groves suggested civilian personnel. These non-law enforcement officers would serve as an “intermediary between police and passengers to prevent arbitrary and abusive police encounters.”²⁴

Lack of Urgency to Heal the HealthLine

In 2017, armed police fare enforcement was ruled unconstitutional and GCRTA eliminated proof-of-payment on the HealthLine. It has been over 3 years since and GCRTA has done nothing. Restoring proof-of-payment with transit ambassadors, as the court ruling strongly suggests, would speed up trips on the HealthLine and could be expanded to more bus lines, speeding up their trips as well. Similarly, it's been years since GCRTA promised to establish a transparent, public process for the submission of police complaints but GCRTA has not acted.

Fare Evasion Decriminalization

Currently, under local and state law, failure to pay a \$2.50 fare can land you in jail for 30 days along with a \$250 fine. That is unjust. CPT demands the decriminalization of fare evasion both locally and statewide. No person thinks failing to pay a parking meter should land you in jail. Similarly, no person should risk jail time just because they cannot afford a \$2.50 fare.



On May 30, 2020, according to public records, RTA deployed 16 members of its Emergency Services Team to the Cuyahoga County Justice Center at a cost of \$9,133.62.

FREQUENCY IS FREEDOM: FUND TRANSIT

People who ride public transit deserve effective and affordable service. Endless cuts to GCRTA have eliminated entire bus routes and slashed how often the remaining buses arrive. A bus that comes every 10 minutes is much more useful than a bus that comes every hour. A bus that runs 24/7 is much more useful than a bus that stops running at 7 pm Monday to Friday. Frequent, all-day service adds to the connectivity of the bus network and makes better, more usable transit.



The standard 9-to-5 work day is changing fast, but Cuyahoga County's transit network is not keeping up with that change. Healthcare workers, students, hospitality and entertainment workers, people going to medical appointments or shopping all deserve transit that's efficient and affordable.

To make better use of its limited resources, GCRTA implemented its NEXT GEN bus network redesign in June 2021. The new network links riders to 11% more jobs in under 60 minutes than the previous network. It's an improvement, but not enough.

The current network redesign is a budget-neutral concept that puts more people and jobs within range of frequent transit, but without additional funding to expand frequent transit to more areas 7 days a week, GCRTA's ridership will continue to decline. Fares will become increasingly unaffordable, and service will become less useful. More funding is needed to reverse the transit death spiral and expand the transit system redesign.

By increasing transit funding by 25%, over 250% more Cuyahoga County residents would have access to frequent transit and nearly 38% more jobs would be accessible by a 60-minute trip.²⁵



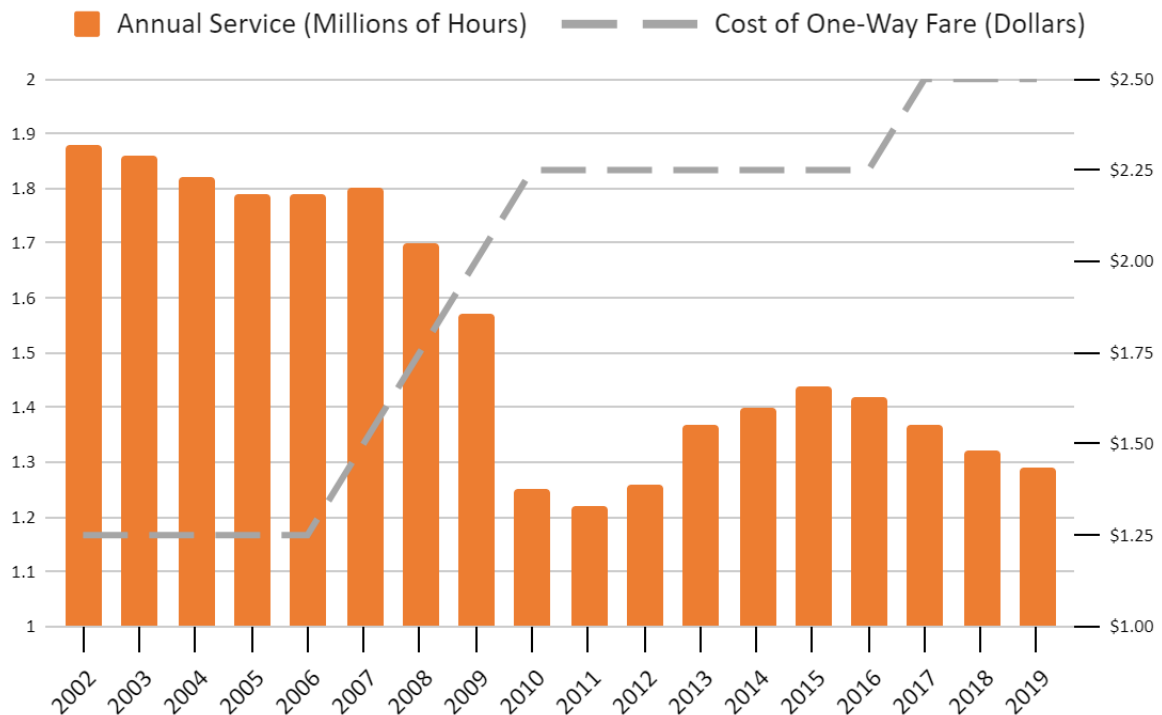
Local Funding

GCRTA's primary funding mechanism is a one-percent sales tax within Cuyahoga County. This tax was set at GCRTA's inception in 1975 and has never been increased. Cuyahoga County has lost nearly 30% of its population since then, resulting in losses of nearly \$70 million annually to GCRTA.²⁶ The county's 2019 Climate Action Plan states as a goal to "return public transit service and ridership to 2006 levels by 2025"²⁷ but has not yet taken any action to achieve this. Increasing ridership means adding service and frequency, and this will require more funding. The time to act is now.

Columbus, Cincinnati, and Lake County voters have all passed successful transit levies in the last 5 years, while Toledo transit funding is going to the ballot in November 2021. When CPT called for a transit levy in 2018, GCRTA considered it but the Board President opted instead for "likely sometime in 2019."²⁸ Three years later, riders are still waiting.

For consistent and sufficient service, GCRTA needs new and stable funding streams; it is important that those streams be diverse to protect against market and policy fluctuations. CPT believes there is a critical need for a transit levy and there is support from voters in Northeast Ohio to find a permanent funding source.

GCRTA Annual Service Hours and Fares: Service Cut Over 25% While Fares Have Doubled Since 2005



Levy Options

◇ A property tax, which would provide stable and substantial funding. A property tax would be more equitable, but may be unpopular among the wealthiest residents of Cuyahoga County. Moreover, 45% of properties in Cleveland are exempt from property taxes.²⁹

⇒ If a county property tax fails it can be retried in the largest municipality and other municipalities can join voluntarily. (i.e. if the GCRTA board proposes a property tax and it fails, it can be retried in Cleveland. Lakewood and Cleveland Heights could voluntarily also put it on the ballot.) This only works for a property tax and could be a lifeline for immediate GCRTA funding in transit supportive communities.

◇ A sales tax, which is a funding source that already exists for GCRTA. A sales tax may be more politically viable, but the burden on county residents is inequitable. Managing the regressive nature of a sales tax would require further regulations, exemptions, and complications. A sales tax would also make public transit vulnerable during economic disruption.

Diverse and Equitable Funding Mechanisms

Cuyahoga County declared racism a public health crisis in 2020 and created the Citizens Advisory Council on Equity (CACE) to study the disparity between black and white people in 8 core focus areas. CACE included quality transportation for two reasons:

1. Four times as many black people than white people in Cuyahoga County rely on transit to get to their jobs, go grocery shopping, medical appointments, school, and other activities.³⁰
2. 20% of all Cuyahoga County households located in a food desert do not have a motor vehicle.³¹

Cuyahoga County is in a unique position to take action. CPT recommends the exploration, study, and implementation of these equitable funding mechanisms:

Parking Taxes and Revenues. Just as Cuyahoga County has implemented a special sales tax on cigarettes and alcohol to fund sports stadiums and the arts, the county should enact a special property tax on parking lot owners. The tax could generate over \$60 million annually towards transportation alternatives, such as expanded transit service, bike and pedestrian infrastructure, and discounted transit fares for low-income county residents.



53% reduction in
transportation costs



\$51.9 Million in annual savings
for riders not using a car

There are 940 million square feet of parking in Cuyahoga County, but only 680 million square feet of housing.³² Taxing parking facility owners would provide an equitable solution for Cleveland, where 25% of residents do not own a car.³³

It is also good for the economy to discourage using land for parking. Buildings generate 6-20 times more tax revenue per square foot than surface parking lots.³⁴ Where similar taxes have been implemented in Australia and England, transit mode share increased to over 40% and carbon emissions dropped by 33%.³⁵ With a special parking tax, Cuyahoga County would become an international example for sustainability.

As noted by parking economics expert Donald Shoup, parking should never be free.³⁶ If parking is free, there is a high cost elsewhere. In Cuyahoga County, overabundant parking has helped make transit unaffordable and unreliable.

It is also good for the economy to discourage using land for parking. Buildings generate 6-20 times more tax revenue per square foot than surface parking lots.

Mobility Bundles can help build political support for increased taxes and revenues. Including public transit with upgrades to bicycle, pedestrian, and accessibility infrastructure would broaden the coalition of supporters to get policy changes moving and passed. In 2020, Cincinnati voters passed Issue 7 that included strong funding for transit and other infrastructure throughout Hamilton County.

State Funding

In 2015, the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) announced a goal to cover 10% of costs for transit agencies statewide with a new dedicated funding source by 2025. Such a funding level would net GCRTA an additional \$30 million. However, restoring service cuts since 2006 and implementing the expanded service option from their NEXT GEN bus network redesign would cost GCRTA nearly \$70 million annually.³⁷

Despite ODOT's own recommendations the state has failed to act. Ohio has historically not been kind to public transit—allocating less than one dollar per resident for transit. Despite small gains in the 2022-2023 budget, the state still contributes a paltry sum. In Pennsylvania and Illinois, the state contributes more than ten times as much to transit per resident than in Ohio.

CPT will continue to advocate at the Ohio Statehouse, but matching ODOT's funding level target will not be enough to replace stable sources of local funding. Cuyahoga County needs funds to restore and expand transit service now.

Federal Funding

Federally, Congress has historically subsidized suburban sprawl through highway spending and let transit operations suffer. The federal Highway Trust Fund allocates funding in an 80/20 split: 80% for highways, 20% for transit.³⁸ In 2021, Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown, a Cleveland resident, was appointed chair of the U.S. Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs, which oversees legislation on urban mass transit. CPT will continue to engage Senator Brown and all our federal representatives to change these backwards policies and reverse the “80/20 split”, but we need investment in transit now.

MAKE TRANSIT BETTER

Riders should be at the center of every decision at GCRTA. Riders see the everyday problems of the system when they try to catch their bus or train. Riders know what's at stake when the bus is late or a train breaks down.



GCRTA Headquarters, downtown Cleveland

Better Board, Better Buses

To become an agency that is truly dedicated to providing a quality public service for all, there must be a cultural change within GCRTA. And that change starts with the GCRTA Board of Trustees. The Board consists of 10 appointees: 4 by the City of Cleveland, 3 by Cuyahoga County, and 3 suburban mayors and city managers.

Riders recognize the problems on the transit but have no formal power to make change. It is, therefore, imperative that riders serve on the GCRTA Board of Trustees. CPT applauds Cuyahoga County for finally appointing a rider to the board in 2021, but the work is not finished. Building an active and engaged Board of Trustees will take more than 1 out of 10 members who understand the perspective of riders.

COVID-19 Response: A Once in a Lifetime Opportunity

COVID-19 relief packages represent a great opportunity to improve transit now. GCRTA is receiving \$315 million while the City of Cleveland is receiving over \$500 million and Cuyahoga County more than \$200 million. These are transformational amounts of money. CPT demands that the public be involved in the allocation of these funds through a participatory budgeting process.



CPT believes there are many ways this funding can be used to improve riders' everyday experience:

- Implementing a new fare collection system as soon as possible, with contactless fare cards for riders and card readers at every door on all buses and trains to keep riders and operators safe during pandemics and permanently speed up trip times.
- Providing free passes to low-income residents of Cleveland and Cuyahoga County.
- Investing in rider necessities including bus and Rapid stop shelters, public bathrooms, and public space.
- Funding affordable housing and equitable Transit-Oriented Development near frequent transit lines.

Rider Necessities and Accessibility

Riders demand comfort and dignity when waiting for their bus or train. Less than 20% of the thousands of bus stops across GCRTA's system have any sort of shelter.³⁹ Even fewer have trash cans or maps, let alone information on the next bus. In the winter, many stops are practically unusable because no one clears snow off the sidewalk. There are no heated bus shelters. There are only two bathrooms in the entire system, one for customers of the diner at Stokes-Windermere and another at the Stephanie Tubbs Jones Transit Center.

GCRTA and its partners must invest in improving the waiting experience for riders at stops throughout Cuyahoga County. These necessities include standalone public bathrooms, heated shelters, real-time arrival clocks, lighting, trash cans, and maps. Accountability for snow removal at bus stops is imperative. High-ridership stops and historically under-invested neighborhoods should be the first priorities for these rider necessities.



In 2020, there were over 50 elevator outages in RTA's rail system. Stokes-Windermere, the last stop on the Red Line and a key station for bus connections, had more than 10 outages. West 117-Madison and West Blvd-Cudell stations also had at least 5 outages each.⁴⁰ GCRTA must do better.

Furthermore, the agency must also do better maintaining the accessibility of buses; too often buses with inoperable wheelchair ramps are put into service. By providing high-quality, dignified fixed-route bus service accessible to all, GCRTA will also save money by providing fewer origin-to-destination paratransit trips.

Restore Transfers for All

GCRTA's elimination of one-way transfers in 2008 coincided with service cuts that increased the number of trips that required a transfer. CPT applauds GCRTA's decision to roll-back the cost of an all-day pass to \$5, but riders shouldn't have to spend that just because they have to transfer buses to get to their destination.

Riders are buying time on transit, not just a particular seat. Indeed, riders who use GCRTA's mobile app effectively already have a one-hour transfer window. But those who can't afford or don't use a smartphone and pay their fare in cash are forced to spend double for one-way trips. Although GCRTA offers one-trip, two-trip and five-trip passes with transfers, these are not available from fareboxes and are not widely distributed.

Reduced and Free Fares

GCRTA, the City of Cleveland, Cuyahoga County, and local nonprofit and philanthropic organizations must immediately establish a low-income fare discount program. This could be done through various mechanisms but must ensure those with the most need are adequately served.

Furthermore, we must work toward a well-serviced fare free system for all. Just like at the library, ideally, there would be no cost at the point of service. Yet recognizing the importance of over \$30 million in annual farebox revenue to GCRTA, CPT believes that increasing service coverage and frequency, while providing fare relief to those most in need, is the most immediate need for riders.

GCRTA could institute all-door boarding on every route. Trip times could be cut by 20% overnight, for every single rider on every single trip.

A Brighter Future for Fares

GCRTA's fare collection system is badly outdated. It is holding them back from providing their riders faster, easier, and more reliable trips. The effect of a well-designed, modern fare collection system would be nothing short of transformational. CPT calls on GCRTA to implement a new fare collection system as soon as possible, with contactless fare cards for riders and card readers at every door on all buses and trains.



With card readers at every door, GCRTA could institute all-door boarding on every route. Trip times could be cut by 20% overnight,⁴¹ for every single rider on every single trip. Transit ambassadors would check fares on all routes, not just the HealthLine and Red Line, allowing bus and train operators to concentrate on driving their vehicle safely and providing more “eyes on the ground” for the agency.

Other common-sense improvements become simple to implement with a new fare collection system:

- Free transfers, which GCRTA eliminated in 2008, are simpler and faster when bus operators aren't required to hand riders a paper slip.
- Fare capping would prevent riders from unwittingly overpaying for transit, like a pay-as-you-go daily or monthly pass, without the hassle.
- Lowered or free fares can be targeted both by cardholder, such as for low-income riders, and also by time-of-day, such as an off-peak discount to reduce crowding, with the push of a button.
- A modern fare collection system can be designed to work on other local transit systems, instantly making regional trips less confusing for riders.

Procuring a new fare collection system is in the GCRTA's Strategic Plan, but only for the “medium term”. There are no stated plans for all-door boarding, free transfers, discount programs, or other major benefits of a modern system. They show no urgency for this transformational, rider-friendly technology. It's long past time GCRTA allowed free transfers, lowered fares for those who need transit the most, and sped up every single trip to boot. There must be no delay in modernizing fare collection at GCRTA.

Reimagine Transit with Equitable Transit-Oriented Development

GCRTA's rail system is an underutilized asset worth over \$4 billion dollars.⁴² Getting people closer to already existing frequent train and bus lines while reducing sprawl development, longer commutes, increased pollution and population decline out of Cuyahoga County is essential.



Policies that incentivize transit-oriented development (TOD) help. Creating model ordinances or zoning codes that eliminate parking minimums while also promoting mixed-use, equitable development and density bonuses can promote transit use, as proposed by Cuyahoga County's Climate Action Plan.⁴³

The creation of a regional partnership to concentrate development along frequent transit corridors was recommended by an independent analysis of GCRTA published in 2019.⁴⁴ The partnership could include GCRTA, Cuyahoga County Council, Cuyahoga County Office of Sustainability, Cleveland City Council, Sustainable Cleveland, Cleveland Vision Zero, Bike Cleveland, Vibrant NEO 2040, NOACA, Greater Cleveland Partnership, Port of Cleveland, Cleveland Neighborhood Progress, and other non-profit leaders.

Aspen Place is a good example of TOD locally.⁴⁵ GCRTA collaborated with Detroit Shoreway Community Development Organization to build affordable housing next to the W 65th-Lorain Red Line station and provide free monthly passes to tenants. Equitable TOD like this could be jump started with federal COVID-19 relief funds.

Think Big and Expand Transit

Due to sprawl development, over 60% of jobs in Cuyahoga County are not transit-accessible. This is a huge problem, not a micromobility problem. Northeast Ohio's economy suffers because potential workers can't reach businesses that want to hire them. The Greater Cleveland Partnership (GCP), the local chamber of commerce, needs to get on the bus. Recently, Cincinnati voters passed a transit levy with strong backing from their local chamber. GCP should follow Cincinnati's lead by using their resources to advocate for increased local transit funding now.

"Right now RTA happens to be operating in Cuyahoga County, but ultimately RTA should cover five counties."⁴⁶

Leonard Ronis, 1977,
founding General Manager of GCRTA.

Northeast Ohio needs to take action, reverse the transit death spiral, and make our region a leader in transit. Over 40 years after GCRTA was created, it has not expanded at all and service continues to be cut to the bone as Cuyahoga County loses population. In 2021, NOACA published a Regional Strategic Transit Plan covering five counties in Northeast Ohio but it remains just another plan.⁴⁷ For decades, riders have seen countless plans that call to fund and expand transit. But they're just words. There has never been action. Now is the time to act.





RTA

Cleveland Clinic

2903

HEALTHLINE

HealthLine

SAFE PLACE

University Hospitals

Cleveland Clinic

2903

OH 7777

Campus District

HELP CLOSURE

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Clevelanders for Public Transit

www.clefortransit.org

(216) 714-2164 call or text

info@clefortransit.org

