



## Overview:

Founded in 1983, the **Oklahoma Transit Association** (OTA) is the state's voice for public transit. OTA's mission is to support public transit through advocacy, education, communication, and partnerships. More information can be found at [www.OKTransit.org](http://www.OKTransit.org). OTA's membership is comprised of the 37 urban, small urban, suburban, rural, and tribal transit agencies who share the common priority of providing and improving mobility and access for all Oklahoma residents and industry-related vendors who share our vision. Oklahoma Transit Agencies complete over 10 million rides per year in the state. We serve all 77 counties and over 99% of Oklahomans live within a mile of a transit route.

Oklahoma transit riders include everyone, but we serve several special populations, including those with mobility issues, the disabled, and elderly, so transportation to life saving medical appointments, or even access to groceries for those who have food insecurity, are some of our most impactful rides each day.

Oklahoma transit providers are innovative and leading the way in several innovative transit projects that have received national recognition.

1. Sponsored by the OTA, several transit agencies and industry partners, **the ROC Bus** is an FTA funded grant initiative that provides hands-on mobile training to transit agencies and the public. Training opportunities include wheelchair securement, driver training, human trafficking awareness, mobility issues awareness, and transit career opportunities. This one-of-a-kind project launched in November 2022. It has already trained medical personnel classes in Frederick, been on display in Oklahoma City for the public, presented to transit professionals in Durant, and will be visiting the Muscogee Nation soon and available to all communities in Oklahoma in the coming year.
2. **The Climb Ride Program**, a project of Embark in Oklahoma City, provides families in the foster care system with comprehensive transportation options, including transportation training, incentives, and post-program support, as participants work to complete their court-ordered services.
3. **PICK Transportation** is a mobility on demand, curb-to-curb service provided within 21 rural Oklahoma communities. All vehicles are ADA-compliant, and users can book on-demand public transit trips through smartphones, app, or web portal. PICK connects riders to many destinations, including shopping, social events, restaurants, doctor appointments, hospitals, schools, jobs, and home.

**Issues:** Public Transit continues to be heavily impacted by the pandemic fallout. The following issues impact our ability to best serve our communities across Oklahoma.

- **Employee Recruitment and Retention**
- **Supply Chain Delays (parts and vehicles)**
- **The Continued Match Gap Challenge**
- **Charter Regulation Reform**
- **Preparing for the Future of Transit in Oklahoma**

## The Match Gap Challenge

- Oklahoma Public Transit Agencies work tirelessly to provide the best experience for their riders and always explores ways to best leverage their state funding to match federal dollars.
- The funding match gap is an ongoing problem, especially in competitive grants, where Oklahoma agencies, compete with larger municipalities across the country. Fluctuations in the requirements from 80/20 to 50/50 match requirements, also cause hardships on smaller agencies who receive less of our limited state funding.

## **Employee Recruitment and Retention**

- Transit Funding/Budget does not allow for increased pay to be competitive with private companies.
- Marijuana Laws preclude many people from being able to pass federal requirements/drug screenings.
- Despite federal protections for drivers in the Fast Act, driver assaults (verbal and physical) continue to be a problem.
- Agencies report that retirees make up 24% of all quitting workers and at rural agencies, 34% of departures. Nationally, 43% of transit workers are over 55, nearly double the percentage of the broader transportation sector.
- According to the most recent survey in late 2022, the American Public Transportation Association says, 96% of transits are experiencing a staffing shortage and 84% are reporting they are having trouble meeting their mission.

## **Supply Chain Vehicle and Parts Delays**

- The lack of vehicles available for delivery or the lack of access to parts to repair an aging fleet continues to strain transit agencies. The logistics crisis is worsening due to the continued economic challenges, staff shortages, and the overstrain in freight transportation systems.
- Congress should intervene and prohibit companies from canceling accepted vehicle contracts for public transit vehicles and EMS vehicles and preclude them from renegotiating these contracts for them at a higher fee and longer delivery dates.
- While the pandemic saw a decline in transit ridership, a continued lack of vehicles being delivered and the operational cost of fueling transit vehicles may continue to hinder the ability of transit to operate effectively and regain lost riders. Federal gas tax relief for public transit vehicles should be considered.

## **Charter Regulation Reform**

- There is no effective notification process, leaving the public believing the local transit provider dropped the ball.
- Companies who respond should be required to prove they can provide accessible vehicles and similar-type vehicles being requested.
- Companies who respond should do so in the spirit of truly being able to provide the available service. A contiguous-states or distance limit may be a better solution than a national approach.

## **Preparing for the Future of Transit in Oklahoma**

- The opportunity for public/private partnership opportunities exists in Oklahoma but the current restrictive nature of transit requirements does not allow for creative solutions between transit agencies to help move the workforce from rural to urban areas seamlessly.
- Currently, several 5311's must keep any projects within an urbanized area separate from 5311. Service operating expenses in these non-5311 areas cannot be submitted for reimbursement and must be tracked separately from 5311 data and expenses. Since the data is not submitted in the NTD, the data is not factored into the potential overall consideration of funding allocation.
- The continued volatility of diesel /gasoline prices/CNG continue to be challenging for public transit budgets. However, the future required transition to electric vehicles (EV) is not practical for most rural areas. Current EV vehicles will not operate at the daily mileage radius needed. Additionally, ODOT's plan for electric infrastructure is limited to high traffic corridors and will be inaccessible in rural areas. Few mechanics on a statewide basis are trained to service these vehicles and rural infrastructure doesn't allow for efficient charging. While we understand protecting the needs of our environment, we also realize these aggressive timelines and push for no/low vehicle conversion is not realistic for our 5311 providers and will further complicate our operations.

## **In conjunction with the Southwest Transit Association, OTA supports the following 2023 – 2024 Legislative Priorities**

### **Ensure Annual Transit Appropriations Match Authorized Levels:**

The 5-year funding levels authorized in the Infrastructure Investment & Jobs Act (IIJA)/Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) sets the stage for substantial support and improvement of transit systems of all sizes across the country. Congress needs to honor these levels each year in the appropriations process. FTA and Congress also needs to address the match gap in federal funding, as strained systems cannot reasonably meet the match requirements despite the availability of federal funding.

### **Provide Relief for Vehicle Shortages and Employee Hiring:**

The impacts of COVID have left long-lasting imprints on the ability of transit providers to procure new vehicles and hire additional front-line staff. Specific policy and regulatory mechanisms such as flexible changes, updates, or waivers to Buy America(n) requirements, the Commercial Driver's License (CDL) process, drug and alcohol testing procedures, housing programs and more can ease the burden on transit agencies in maintaining and expanding service.

### **Explore Updates to Non-Federal Match Requirements, Especially for Rural Providers:**

The federal-state-local partnership in funding public transit systems has been and remains essential to our industry. But some federal programs contain non-federal match ratios that are difficult to achieve for many communities, often leaving federal funds on the table because no state or local funding is available. This is especially true in rural areas, where economic recovery takes longer and isolation drives costs higher.

### **Support All Forms of Additional Revenue for Transportation:**

Due to federal gas tax rates that have remained unchanged for a generation, the Highway Trust Fund and its Mass Transit Account are often insolvent, requiring infusions of unrelated revenue by the Congress. Options include raising the gas tax as well as initiation of vehicle miles traveled (VMT) strategies to allow electric and hybrid vehicles to contribute, along with other ideas.

### **Create New & Innovative Programs to Prepare for the Future:**

Even before COVID, transit networks were exploring new and more flexible ways to serve the entirety of their communities through new technologies, fare strategies, service models. New programs that offer specific investment for public transit innovation will allow us to enhance mobility and meet needs for affordable housing, access to education and health care, crucial services for veterans and others and fuel local economies with job growth and commercial activity.

### **Investigate Updates to Charter Service Regulations:**

Private transportation companies play important roles in moving people to work, events and destinations, often in partnership with transit agencies. But in many smaller communities, these businesses do not have a meaningful presence and current federal regulations prevent transit agencies from acting like a business to obtain non-federal revenue and meeting local needs for purpose-built passenger service.

### **Cited Data:**

- <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2019/05/24/2019-10281/protecting-public-transportation-operators-from-the-risk-of-assault>
- <https://www.transit.dot.gov/funding/grants/fta-program-fact-sheets-under-bipartisan-infrastructure-law>
- <https://www.transportation.gov/briefing-room/bipartisan-infrastructure-law-will-deliver-oklahoma>
- <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/03/07/fact-sheet-vice-president-harris-announces-actions-to-accelerate-clean-transit-buses-school-buses-and-trucks/>
- <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-45/subtitle-A/subchapter-A/part-75/subpart-D/subject-group-ECFR911e5e1a30bfcb/section-75.306>
- [www.oktransit.org](http://www.oktransit.org)