

Commentary

James Cummings:

Proposal 'giant step backward' for rail

By James Cummings

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It's probably going to be a tough year for getting federal funds to keep buses and trains running, and hopes of expanding transportation options that get people out of their cars in Ohio look pretty dim right now.

The Greater Dayton Regional Transit Authority, rail service advocates All Aboard Ohio, the Ohio Department of Transportation, the American Public Transportation Association and other groups all put a priority on "multimodal" transportation that includes alternatives to the one-person-one-car patterns that overburden Ohio's highways. But the 2009 federal budget proposal President Bush recently sent to Congress calls for substantial cuts to public transportation and rail funding.

Bush said cuts are necessary to balance the federal budget, and he has proposed reductions in many programs beyond transportation.

In years past, mass transit advocates say Congress has balked at the Bush's calls for transit budget cuts. But the advocates fear that in a presidential election year when it's possible for office holders to make political points by appearing to hold the line on spending, Congress members may be more inclined to leave Bush's proposed cuts in place.

Among the administration's budget proposals is a call to reduce the operating subsidy for Amtrak from \$1.3 billion to \$800 million. Amtrak, the passenger rail service, has never been able to operate solely on passenger fares, and the federal government provides support to keep the trains running.

Andrew Bremer, executive director of All Aboard Ohio, called the proposed budget cut "a giant step backward" and "an attempt to have ideology trump common sense." All Aboard Ohio promotes the development of passenger rail service and is a supporter of the Ohio Hub Plan, a proposal also supported by the Ohio Department of Transportation that would establish train routes to link Ohio's major cities to the rest of the country by rail.

Currently few Ohioans find passenger trains a convenient way to travel, Bremer said. All Aboard Ohio is lobbying Congress for funding to at least study improved rail service to Cleveland and the rest of northern Ohio.

Bremer said the proposed cut in Amtrak funding has no direct impact on the Ohio Hub Plan, but he said Bush's position indicates the administration has abdicated the federal government's role in promoting interstate commerce.

Also troubling are plans to cut public transportation funding in the administration's budget proposals, said Mark Donaghy, executive director of the Greater Dayton Regional Transit Authority.

The proposals call for a \$202 million cut in public transportation supports in budget year 2009. Also suggested is the shift of \$3.2 billion held in a trust fund for public transit projects to a fund for highway projects.

"The real issue is that we have a huge amount of highway infrastructure built over the last 20 or 30 years, and there isn't enough revenue to maintain that infrastructure," Donaghy said. "Taking money out of public transit to help cover shortfall in highway funding doesn't solve the problem. And in the long run it's really going to jeopardize our ability to keep up with our capital needs.

"Obviously, it's our hope that Congress will repair the damage this would cause before the budget is finalized. But this is an election year, and it may be more challenging to get help from Congress in light of that fact."

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