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House Transportation Committee

Senate Bill 2254 - March 6, 2025

Testimony of Micah Olson, P&A Position-In Support

My name is Micah Olson. I am attorney at Protection & Advocacy. I am speaking today in favor of Senate Bill 2254, a bill to provide an appropriation to the department of transportation for fixed route city transportation services grants; and to provide for a legislative management study.

In my work, I have frequently interacted with individuals who rely on public transportation. Prior to working at Protection & Advocacy, I worked as an Independent Living Advocate in Minot. Through my work, I have become familiar with public transportation in Bismarck, Mandan, and Minot.

Individuals I have interacted with who regularly use public transportation report that it works well for some aspects of daily life, but there are many limitations. For example; In Minot, there are two choices for public transportation: The Minot City Bus, which runs on fixed routes, and Souris Basin Transportation, which provides paratransit in the Minot area. The Minot city bus operates from 7 am to 7 pm Monday through Friday. It does not operate on the weekends. Souris Basin Transportation has longer hours than the city bus but has limited hours on the weekend. Souris Basin also requires individuals to schedule a ride at least 24 hours in advance. Individuals have reported to me that 24 hours in advance is often not soon enough to guarantee a ride will be available. The BisMan City Bus has a similar schedule, but has service on Saturday. It does not operate on Sundays. Individuals who use paratransit in Bismarck have reported the same scheduling issues as in Minot.

Although fixed routes have a reliable schedule, they often have limited hours, making fixed route transportation less useful in some situations. Someone who has a typical daytime work schedule could use it to get to and from work, but it would not be useful for someone who works on days or hours outside of the bus schedule. It is not useful for people to run errands after work or on weekends. A person who relies on the city bus in Minot would have to plan to do errands during the week, which could be difficult for someone who works full-time.

Even though public transportation is useful in many situations, several individuals I have interacted with have reported significant limitations. The fixed routes do not go to all areas of Minot, Bismarck, and Mandan, especially to newer apartment developments. Newer apartment buildings are often more accessible than older apartment buildings and they are often better options for disabled people. In my work, I assisted a wheelchair user who did not drive in finding an apartment. We found an apartment that worked for him, but it was not on the bus route, and he would need to use paratransit to get to work. I worked with other individuals who prioritized convenient access to the city bus over a fully accessible apartment.

Paratransit is often the preferred option for disabled individuals, as it provides door-to-door service, however many individuals who use paratransit still report ongoing difficulties, including work hours not aligning with paratransit's schedule. They might arrive to work very early or late. Sometimes they would have to leave work early if paratransit came early. Individuals also reported not being able to schedule rides on the weekends, even if they attempted to schedule far in advance. Paratransit also does not allow for sudden or spontaneous trips. This affects an individual's ability to socialize and fully participate in community activities and events. Because paratransit is not always readily available, paratransit users may also rely on fixed-route transportation.

Even if someone drives and owns a vehicle, public transportation may still be relevant and should be a viable option. Even though I do not typically need to use public transportation, it still could be relevant to my own life. Because I drive with a hand control, I would not be able to drive another vehicle if I had an unexpected problem with my car.

Additional funding for public transportation would benefit those who do not live near a bus route. The apartment where I previously lived in Minot was not on the bus route, so I would not have access to public transportation if I needed it. Paratransit likely would not be able to assist on short notice, which would affect my ability to get to work or run errands if I was without a personal vehicle.

P&A supports SB 2254, as more funding for fixed routes would benefit disabled individuals in North Dakota. P&A also supports increased funding for paratransit.