

**Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 2254
Funding for Urban Public Transit
Senate Transportation Committee**

January 30, 2025

Good afternoon Chairman Clemens and members of the committee. My name is Julie Bommelman, the Transit Director from Fargo. I am speaking in support of SB2254 because I see the impact and importance of public transportation on every citizen in the State of North Dakota.

SB2254 identifies the needs of public transportation (transit) providers in the urban areas (Fargo, Grand Forks, Minot and Bismarck) within North Dakota. The providers of urban transit within the State of North Dakota request a more substantive state funding program to assist with the costs associated with fixed-route ridership on public transportation. In partnership with transit officials in Minot and Grand Forks, we are respectfully requesting a \$15 million biennium appropriation to assist urban transit cities with the growing expenses of providing fixed-route transit, along with requiring a study to determine a permanent funding solution for urban fixed-route transit services in North Dakota.

We are representing urban transit providers in ND and the funding request before you today is for our fixed-route systems. Fixed-route systems are transit services operated along predetermined routes according to a fixed schedule. There is also paratransit service, which applies to all public entities who operate a fixed route system (there is a requirement to provide paratransit service that is both comparable and complementary to the fixed route services; this is a curb-to-curb or door-to-door accessible service for qualifying individuals who cannot use the fixed route system). Additionally, demand-response transit is any non-fixed route system of transporting individuals that requires advanced scheduling by the customer.

1. Federal Reclassification

The designation of transit providers (urban, rural, tribal) is defined by population in accordance with the latest official federal census. The 2020 census reclassified the City of Fargo from a small to large urban designation with a population over 200,000 which resulted in a reduction of over \$600,000 or 17% in federal operating assistance. In accordance with ND Public Transportation Fund 39-04.2-02, the State public transit funding we currently receive can be used to operate transit services and as a local match to federal dollars. The State of ND funding is not designed, nor appropriately funded, to support the needs of urban fixed-route ridership. The funding model is based on elderly and disabled riders and results in inadequate and disparate funding. With the current allocation model, the urban counties are all at the bottom of the list, with Cass County being the very last at \$2.95 per rider.

I would like to emphasize the study is an imperative part of this bill, as it would allow the funding formula to be appropriately modified while protecting the current funds being allocated to the rural and smaller counties. We do not want to take away from their portion – we are looking to right-size the funding going to the fixed-route transit systems in our urban areas.

Urban areas recognize the requirement to fund a local portion for transit providers, however, the City of Fargo's General Fund cannot sustain the current annual subsidy. Due to rising costs of providing transit, the City of Fargo's annual Transit subsidy has grown to an anticipated \$5.5 million for 2025, from approximately \$600,000 per year in 2016. This "fiscal cliff" has been building over time, however, COVID transit funds during 2020-2023 camouflaged the issue and delayed the inevitable for several years. Fargo

has weathered significant increases in operating (i.e. bus driver services, security services, staffing/retainage) and in capital costs (bus replacements, parts, shelters, supplies). The rising costs not only limit our ability to expand critical transportation services but leave significant unmet needs such as expansion of service into unserved areas, Sunday fixed-route service, additional critical staff, updated vehicles/capital equipment, facilities upgrades/expansion and safety and security upgrades. I want to emphasize the criticality of receiving the requested funding for **maintaining** existing service levels and avoid transit service cuts like we saw during COVID. We are currently close to returning services to pre-COVID levels and do not want to see cuts in our service.

Transit is much more than just transportation, it is independent access and affects workforce/commerce, health (medical treatments and appointments), education, and basic needs such as grocery visits. Transit connects people to jobs, schools, social services, faith-based activities, health facilities and community activities. Transit allows workers and job seekers to reach places of employment, helps elderly and persons with disabilities lead independent lives, gives shoppers the opportunity to purchase goods and services and reduces congestion and improves air quality. The State of North Dakota reaps benefits from public transit within urban communities. As such, transit contributes to economic development and related state/local taxes, supports preventative health care and personal independence which allows residents to remain in their own homes and out of state-subsidized care facilities longer, and encourages higher education and related workforce development. For citizens who rely on publicly available transportation as their only way to reach school or employment, the lack of transportation programs and services can create barriers to education and potential job opportunities.

The Fargo area is also a regional medical center, a source of essential human services, and a growing draw for senior citizens, both locally and from outlying communities. Having transportation to these services and access to the community is key for quality of life (see attached input from passengers). In Fargo we have programs to encourage use of fixed-route public transportation: we offer a business/transit program where we partner with Sanford to purchase passes for their employees utilizing transit. They see the program as a benefit to their employees and themselves as it decreases the need for additional parking but enables them to attract employees who otherwise may not be able to reach their locations; we also offer demand-response services to the industrial park area and in the evenings around the North Dakota State University (NDSU) campus; and we partner with NDSU and other local colleges/universities to offer the U-Pass program which allows eligible college students to ride any fixed route in our system and the participating college/university pays a fee. In fiscal year 2024 Fargo alone provided 706,145 fixed route rides and 234,437 elderly/disabled rides in the State of North Dakota. **Fargo area ridership accounts for 50.5% and 34.2% of the State's total ridership in each respective category.**

We understand the commonsense response to our request for additional funding may be increasing fares or eliminating/reducing frequency of existing fixed routes. Fares make up approximately 10% of our overall funding and implementing either of these (increasing fares or reducing service) will likely result in lower fare revenues and ridership/passenger miles as demonstrated by experience in the industry. As a large urban, ridership and passenger miles are used to determine Federal Section 5307 operating funding and the consequence of increasing fares can lead to lower ridership and subsequently, lower fare revenue, referred to as a 'death spiral'. These services are critical to everyday life for many ND citizens. Urban transit providers would appreciate seeing a \$15 million biennium appropriation and the opportunity to address the interim committees during their study period to determine a permanent funding solution for urban and rural citizens in our state.

Thank you for your consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Transit Rider Input Received in Fargo (582254) (1-30-25)

1. I saw a bus driver be kindly to an elderly lady who was struggling with her groceries and was very patient with her helping her even though he had a schedule to keep. I know it could have been my mother or grandmother and seeing that made me happy. All the bus drivers I have interacted with on the Fargo MATBUS over the past two years have been great.
2. Received a voicemail from a citizen who wanted one of our drivers recognized for helping a blind rider as he got off the bus and was confused because of construction. She said the driver went above and beyond to help this rider and wanted him to be recognized.
3. Driver is a SAINT!! a lady came to the window after off boarding route 15 at 19:15 and wanted management to know how great of a driver he was and how much she appreciated him for his patience with having to deal with a very full bus that had a few rowdy passengers with 1099's on board. She said the driver had patience and professionalism like she has never seen before, she commended him to the fullest and said you could call her back if you want to.
4. Received a call from a rider that wanted to give the driver they had a Kudo's for being very kind and friendly. She stated that he did a phenomenal job and wanted to make sure that he was recognized for that.
5. This driver is such a good driver. He is always on time, nice and polite. I think he is the absolute best! He's very thoughtful and friendly to everyone. The best driver you have!
6. Passenger called in to compliment driver as he helped her on his, the hospital wouldn't help. Without his help she wouldn't have been able to ride his bus.
7. Passenger said driver is very helpful to persons with disabilities riding Route 16. He always makes the 'Cashwise Announcement' manually to make sure everyone hears it.
8. Passenger said that driver has a great personality and is very professional. She said she was feeling extra crabby one day and he handled her attitude with grace. She complimented him on that and the two of them laughed together.
9. Driver is the best driver you have. This man shows up every day and he doesn't complain. For being 73 years old, he does a damn great job. THIS MAN DESERVES DRIVER OF THE YEAR! This guy is the happiest man I know and is the best employee you have!
10. MATBUS driver yesterday deserves a 🐾 🦄 🦊 🦉 🦅 🦄 🦉 🦅 double raise for assistance he gave to a young man in a wheelchair on and off the bus!! THANK YOU 🙏
11. Passenger called to say that the GTC Dispatcher is really nice and helpful. She helped him with his paperwork from the Cour: ty for reloading his pass.
12. The driver is going above and beyond! Everyday when I get on the bus he always says Hi, Good morning how are you? And when I get off he says Have a great day! And waves at me when he drives by me on the Veterans Memorial Bridge on main! I make sure I leave at a quarter til because he makes me day so much better!
13. "I feel like the drivers don't get enough positive compliments, but this driver definitely deserves it! She was friendly and went out of her way to make sure that even in the melting ice and snow, that all of the passengers were able to board and deboard the bus with ease and safety. Most of the drivers are always in a rush and bordering on rude, but this young lady was thoughtful and I just wanted to let you know what a great employee she is!"
14. Passenger left a heartfelt voicemail giving props and lifting up dispatcher for helping her above and beyond! She said she was in a difficult situation and he helped direct her where she needed to go and got her a bus pass. Passenger said she is beyond appreciative, and because of the dispatcher's help, she is now at a new job and has her own apartment. She said please make sure the dispatcher gets the recognition he deserves!
15. You folks NEED more drivers like her. She has a great attitude and tells it like it is, also she is an excellent driver!!
16. You are greatly appreciated for all that you do for myself, other bus riders, the bus drivers, the GTC, and Fargo. Thank you very much.
17. I just wanted to say how awesome the driver of bus 1228 was today. I watched him go out of his way to make it in to our un-plowed parking lot and then he walked all of the way to the other end of our building to assist an elderly woman to the bus.
18. I am writing to express my gratitude for the beautiful thoughtfulness and courtesy that one of your bus drivers showed me and everyone else on her bus this past Thursday, January 13th. I don't know the name of this lovely young woman but she was driving late morning/early afternoon on January 13th, and I hope this information will allow you to identify her and to pass along my thanks.
19. She showed exceptional kindness in so many ways. As I was running toward the bus through heavy snow, she opened the door and called out to me that I didn't need to rush because she knew I was coming and would wait for me. Later, when I rang the bell for my stop, she steered the bus to a spot where I could get off onto cleared pavement instead of into a snowbank.
20. As each passenger got on and off, she greeted each one warmly and gave good wishes to each one who was leaving the bus. When one passenger spoke roughly to another passenger on his way out the door, she apologized on his behalf with reassuring and uplifting words.
21. I rely on the bus to get around town, especially during winter when the sidewalks are icy and the temperatures are low. Riding with a driver like this young lady makes a bus trip not only a form of transportation but also a reminder of how kind and gracious and caring people can be. Please thank her for me
22. Received a call from a rider wanting to compliment driver. The rider fell getting down from a snow bank while boarding the bus and could not get up and driver got off the bus to assist her. She also said that driver is very friendly and helpful, but can also be very strict as the rider has seen her deal with intoxicated riders.
23. I received a call from a rider that wanted to compliment a driver for going above and beyond. The driver helped an elderly man off the bus and to a safe spot because the sidewalk was very slippery. The rider thought that was a very nice thing to do and went above and beyond her duties.
24. I wanted to give a Kudos to the driver of bus 2182 this morning. I was running a bit late this morning due to the 1 hour frequency of Rte 11 and I get off after the bus arrives at the VA so I missed it so I had to walk down to GTC to try to catch an earlier bus and I was so sore I could barely move. Then, on top of that, with the time change it is so dark now when I leave that I had a hard time walking on the ice. Anyway, the driver stopped and waited for me at my stop and even got out and made sure I didn't slip on the ice. There was a big puddle last night and it froze of course but I didn't know and couldn't see how icy it was so I appreciate the driver waiting to make sure I got on the bus safely.
25. My class took the bus to the downtown square today. We wanted to let you know how amazingly helpful the bus driver for bus 11 was. He made our first city bus experience so easy. We are so excited to continue using Mat Bus here on out!
26. I noticed a couple of things that the driver did that I thought should get a kudo's. A passenger was trying to deboard at 20th St & 16th Ave and the spot looked to be full of snow or slippery, so the driver let the passenger stay on and he drove to the nearest driveway to let them off. Thought this was great customer service.
27. Passenger called to compliment driver on his behavior and helpfulness. She said he has a great personality and is upbeat. Passenger reported driver is kind, patient, and understanding.
28. On Monday April 24th, I rode along with driver on Route 18 and she was very helpful to customers all along the route. She also did a great job with driving through the construction on 32nd Ave S, especially with how narrow some areas were.
29. Driver Did a great job even though there was rude passengers. Keep up the great work
30. Received a call from a gal who rode paratransit with her client. She wanted to call and tell us how great her driver was. She said that he is absolutely amazing, personable, kind and compassionate.
31. I want to commend one of your drivers. I have not seen this gentleman before but he was one of the nicest drivers I have encountered lately and I have had a host of problems with the connections lately and winter has not really started yet. First, he verified that the Rte 2 driver had called in my connection request. Then, when we got to 12th Ave and 20th St, the train stop arms were down but went back up after he started up at the red light. He stopped anyway he said to poke his head out the window just to make sure there was no train coming and I appreciate that. Then, when I took Rte 1 at 7:30 to come down to the library to send these messages, he was driving that bus. He greeted everyone very pleasantly. Nice to get some good service. Sorry I don't have a name or number but I hope you can track him down with the time and bus number and give him a kudos.
32. Rec'd a call from passenger and she was very complimentary towards a driver and wanted her to know. She said she was delighted and we were very smart to hire her. She picked her up from the VA today
33. I wanted to compliment the driver on Rte 15 Wednesday, Dec 20 which would have left West Acres about 3:53pm. I made my connection that day for the first time since I started riding that route back in September. I think it was bus 1200 that time but I especially wanted to commend the driver as I saw the bus stopped at a stoplight a few blocks back and started running to try to catch it. I had to be careful as there were some icy patches on the sidewalk and I was carrying a big tin since we had had a potluck at work that day but I made the connection and got home in time to do some outside cleanup and take advantage of the nice weather when it was still light enough to see.
34. Passenger informed me that she had a new driver and she expressed gratitude that the driver inquired about how to best help and work with her when picking her up from Bergstrom. Passenger found this gesture to be very considerate and was pleased to report that the driver was very kind.
35. Driver was driving north on 10th St and a little girl ran across the street in front of his bus. He did a great job of stopping the bus and avoiding an accident.

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| 36 | Driver was about to start the route and went up to a elderly gentleman waiting in the bus shelter for a route. He went up to the man and asked him if he wanted to ride inside the warm bus instead of waiting outside. The man said yes. The Scott proceeded to grab all the man's grocery bags and carry them inside the bus for him. I thought that was amazing customer service from Scott. " |
| 37 | "I saw driver spot one of our regular riders walking west bound at GTC. He then asked rider would you like some assistance finding your bus and escorted him to the bus he was taking. Thank you for going the extra mile to make sure that rider found his way to correct bus. " |
| 38 | A passenger called to say she had a very good experience with driver on 03/15. She said he went out of his way to help her and was a very kind man. She also said she has had many good experiences with our drivers and they deserve to be complimented |
| 39 | Passenger called to compliment driver saying as she is blind and this driver helped her from her door at home to the door at the business and was professional and pleasant. She said this driver was one of our best drivers. |
| 40 | Regular passenger called to thank dispatch for assistance in finding locations along routes whenever she is at the GTC and she is very grateful for the service as it is her only mode of transportation. |
| 41 | He's been deserving of some kind of award numerous times. He has a lot of patience and very good people skills. |
| 42 | Rec'd a call from rider and he wanted to compliment driver for his customer service. Passenger is a paraplegic and the Paratransit seats can be uncomfortable for him, but driver always takes the bumps slowly and slows down when necessary and is very considerate of his disability |
| 43 | A passenger called to compliment a driver on his safe driving. She stated another driver pulled in front of the bus and the driver was able to do an evasive maneuver to avoid a collision. She stated his quick action prevented a serious accident. |
| 44 | It was a terrific experience all the way from calling and booking the ride to her rides. Your staff on the phone was so polite & courteous. The bus drivers were very kind to my 88 year old mother. |
| 45 | I just wanted to say thank you for providing great service. It truly made a difference in our day. |
| 46 | Driver called dispatch and stated she had female passenger that could not speak English and did not know where she was going. Dispatch had driver bring the On-Demand bus to the GTC were the Language-Link service was used to help her get here where the gal needed to go. During this the driver kindly gave the kids some snacks and drinks as I worked to help under stand the passengers needs. We ended up taking her to the Sta-Mart truck stop where she would be safe. |
| 47 | I wanted to compliment one of your drivers this morning, I believe it was bus 4249, would have left GTC at about 6:45am Dec 19, rte 15 Westbound. I don't believe I had ever seen this driver before. We got to 13th Ave and 25th St Stop. There was a lady in a wheelchair waiting to board with a couple of other people and she was having trouble getting over the snowbank so the driver offered to pull up if she was okay with that he said and then she was able to negotiate the ramp and board. He checked to make where they were going and if they needed transfers and got her all buckled in, all with a smile so I appreciate his cheerful attitude and good service on what will probably be a trying day. |