

Testimony
Senate Bill 2254 - Department of Transportation
Funding for fixed route city transportation services grants and to provide for a legislative
management study.
January 30, 2025

Chairman Clemens and members of the committee, my name is Brian Horinka, and I serve as the Transit Superintendent for Minot City Transit. I am here today to passionately advocate for SB 2254.

Minot City Transit does more than operate fixed-route public transit services within our city limits; we are a vital lifeline for the residents of Minot. Historically, we functioned as a rural community, supported by Federal Section 5311 grants from North Dakota. However, our recent transition to an urban designation has brought us to the Federal Section 5307 Urban funding model, and with it, a new set of challenges. This funding process is complex and based on fluctuating formulas tied to population and ridership metrics, leading to unpredictability each fiscal year. This variability hinders our ability to budget effectively and identify the local resources necessary for the matching funds that are critical to securing these federal grants.

Moreover, the current State Aid for Transit grants prioritize support based on senior and disabled ridership, offering much-needed assistance to rural transit providers in our state. Unfortunately, urban transit providers like us receive significantly less funding due to the demographics of fixed-route users. The funding sought in this bill for the upcoming biennium is essential to bridge the gap between available federal resources and the local contributions required. By supporting this legislation, we will not only sustain existing transit services in our urban centers but also pave the way for the

expansion and enhancement of these critical systems as our communities continue to grow.

The current landscape of public transit funding is dire, marked by alarming volatility and soaring costs. In recent years, the expenses associated with delivering transit services have skyrocketed, putting immense pressure on already limited resources. We are grappling with rising operating expenses—fuel and parts costs have surged, while the urgent need to offer competitive wages to attract and retain staff is widening the financial chasm between what is needed and what is available.

Moreover, the price of replacement buses has escalated dramatically, driven by increasingly stringent EPA compliance and a dwindling number of manufacturers capable of meeting the current Buy America standards. To illustrate, a bus that cost us \$455,000 in 2021 now carries an eye-watering price tag of \$650,000 for replacement. This unsustainable inflation in costs forces agencies like ours to extend the lifespan of aging buses far beyond their intended use, resulting in escalating operational costs and an inevitable decline in service quality.

The impact of these rising costs is profound, threatening the very foundation of our public transit system and the essential services it provides to the community. Without immediate and significant intervention, we risk compromising the reliability and accessibility that transit riders depend on every day.

It is important to recognize that current transit funding models heavily emphasize ridership numbers, which can be misleading. In predominantly rural areas like ours, this focus presents significant drawbacks. We must shift our perspective from seeking

volume to valuing the impact our services have on individual lives. The numbers may appear smaller, but the stories behind them are profound.

Consider the single mother of five who relies on our services to ensure that her children reach their schools safely while she can get to work to provide for her family. Think of the gentleman who, due to health complications, can no longer drive but is able to attend his doctor's appointments and engage in community activities, thanks to our transit system. Most strikingly, reflect on the courageous young woman who survived a horrific accident, leaving her paralyzed from the chest down. With our ADA-accessible transit, she has regained a level of independence that allows her to live on her own and participate in life again.

These stories aren't just anecdotes; they represent the hundreds of individuals whose lives are profoundly impacted by the services we provide every single day. Without our transit system, these individuals—and many more like them—could face isolation, diminished quality of life, or even the loss of their homes.

Supporting SB 2254 is not just a matter of funding; it is about affirming our commitment to these lives and the vital role public transit plays in fostering vibrant, inclusive communities. Together, let's ensure that everyone in Minot and the other urban communities in North Dakota has access to the mobility and independence that is their right. Thank you.