

# **A Study of Public Transportation in Lorain County: Summary Report with Consensus Questions**

**Prepared by the League of Women Voters of the Oberlin Area (LVWOA)  
Transportation Study Committee:**

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## About the League of Women Voters

The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan political organization which, since 1920 has sought to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and to influence public policy through education and advocacy. The League is a grassroots organization with memberships at local, state, and national levels. While the League encourages voting and a democratic form of government, it maintains a nonpartisan stance, neither supporting nor opposing candidates for political office. The organization's major goal is to make democracy work for all citizens. With respect to transportation, the League believes that "energy-efficient and environmentally sound transportation systems should afford better access to housing and jobs..."[3]. Information describing the League's position on a variety of issues is available at the website ([www.lwv.org](http://www.lwv.org)).

## About the Study

**The LWVOA Public Transportation Study.** In 2013, the League of Women Voters of the Oberlin Area (LWVOA) formed a sub-committee to study public transportation in Lorain County and to conduct a county-wide transportation survey regarding attitudes towards public transportation. On September 11, 2013, (Revised February 18, 2014) the LWVOA drafted a position statement concerning public transportation, the major points of which are listed below.

- (1) The LWVOA believes that a healthy public transit service is a valuable community asset.
- (2) Lorain County has the nucleus for such a service but has been stymied by the lack of consistent funding. This has resulted in the County's having to scale back its system to a "bare bones" system.
- (3) The benefits of a good public transit system are: improved mobility, better access to available jobs, and an alternative to the private automobile for those unable to drive themselves. These translate into improved economic benefits for the region.
- (4) Every local dollar spent on transit attracts additional state and federal dollars.
- (5) The key to a stable source of funding lies in a permanent tax. Of the two presently available forms of taxation, real estate levies or sales, the sales tax will offer the highest benefit, probably be the least difficult to sell and is consistent with our neighboring counties.
- (6) For the County to obtain State and Federal dollars for transit, a staff skilled in the writing of grant applications will be needed for a period of years before these additional dollars can be fully realized.

**Study Methodology.** The Transportation Survey was carried out in the fall of 2013 and utilized an online questionnaire to obtain public input throughout the county. Prior to finalizing the survey, data regarding county transit statistics and current facilities were obtained from the offices of the County Commissioners and state representative Dan Ramos. Information regarding past surveys and current public transit issues was obtained from The Oberlin Project, Lorain County Community College, Linking Employment Abilities and Potential (LEAP), Oberlin College, and other non-profit groups. The Survey Monkey software program was used to design the questionnaire and analyze collected data. Inquiries were made at public libraries and several commercial establishments throughout the county for LWVOA members to collect on-site survey data in addition to the on-line survey. Efforts to utilize commercial establishments were unsuccessful but most public

libraries were amenable to on-site data collection. Therefore LWVOA members visited eight public libraries throughout the county to hand out paper questionnaires and obtain data on site. To generate publicity for the survey, announcements were made in local newspapers (News Tribune, Chronicle, Rural Urban Record), LWVOA Newsletter, on websites (LWVOA, Oberlin Project, LEAP), and on Channel 9. Visits were made to Oberlin College and Lorain County Community College for volunteers and for publicizing the survey in college websites.

The objectives of the survey were to obtain information from a random sampling of Lorain County residents (urban, rural, specific age groups, disability or non-disability) regarding: (a) attitudes and perceptions of existing service; (b) major reasons why existing service was or was not used; (c) level of interest in expanding or improving service; and (d) level of support for using tax dollars to expand or improve service.

## **BACKGROUND: Lorain County**

According to the 2010 Census, the population of Lorain County is about 301,357 people, with approximately 133,022 workers 16 years old or over (Table 1)[11]. Less than 1% of these workers (1,185) reported using public transportation. Approximately 2.9% or 3,854 reported working at home.

|                         |                                       |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Population              | 301,357                               |
| Median Age              | 40                                    |
| Number of Companies     | 20,283                                |
| Education               | 88.7% high school graduates or higher |
| Housing Units           | 127,036                               |
| Median Household Income | \$51,756                              |
| Below Poverty Level     | 13.6%                                 |
| Foreign-born            | 8,530                                 |
| Veterans                | 25,125                                |

**Lorain County Transit (2003-2013).** The Lorain County Transit, a public transportation system, is operated under the auspices of the Lorain County Commissioners. In March, 2004, the Commissioners assumed operation of the program from the Lorain County Transit Board. Lorain County has no dedicated tax revenue for support of public transportation but must take funds from general revenue. A large part of public transportation money comes from federal grants which require matching local funds. In the economic downturn beginning 2008, voters in November 2009 did not approve a sales tax increase of 0.5%. As a result, the County Commissioners stated they could not provide \$500,000 out of the general fund to operate Lorain County Transit and consequently, in 2009-2010, public bus routes were reduced from 14 lines to 4 with a Cleveland commuter service still operating.

More recently, in the early part of 2013, a 0.04-mill property tax levy specifically for Lorain County Transit was placed on the ballot but was also not approved by the voters. As of 2013, the County's contribution to Lorain

County Transit had dropped from \$1.5 million per year to \$50,000. The lack of matching county funding meant that \$1.5 million in federal funds for transit projects had to be returned. In August of 2013, the Cleveland commuter service was terminated for lack of ridership. Currently, Lorain County transit is focused in Lorain and Elyria which together form a small urbanized area (defined as a population greater than 50,000 and less than 200,000) [7]. Approximately one-fourth of Lorain County land is urbanized with a major rural area in the southern portion of the county. This rural area is not served by public transit and does not support transit levies. [9]. As shown in Table 1, ridership in 2012 had diminished by approximately 90% compared to 2003. In 2014, another 0.065 mill property levy was placed on the ballot [4]. Despite the efforts of a Lorain County Transit Committee promoting economic benefits of extended transit, the levy failed.

|      | Fixed Route | Dial-A-Ride | Total   |
|------|-------------|-------------|---------|
| 2003 | 642,532     | 63,326      | 705,858 |
| 2004 | 746,625     | 65,946      | 812,571 |
| 2005 | 796,475     | 59,212      | 855,687 |
| 2006 | 791,717     | 57,305      | 849,022 |
| 2007 | 674,187     | 47,616      | 721,803 |
| 2008 | 666,020     | 46,198      | 712,218 |
| 2009 | 556,827     | 33,354      | 590,181 |
| 2010 | 98,912      | 8,324       | 107,236 |
| 2011 | 79,225      | 9,697       | 88,922  |
| 2012 | 67,193      | 6,977       | 74,170  |

As of 2014, there are estimated to be 54,800 people in Lorain County who are in need of public transportation [9]. Approximately 13% of Lorain County residents do not own a car. Current national trends indicate that young people do not wish to drive as much as previous generations [1]. The numbers of driver's licenses dropped by 12% between 1983 and 2010. During this time, public transportation ridership throughout the country has trended upward [1]. This suggests that young people are turning to alternative methods of transportation such as public transit. Within Lorain County, the population average age is also increasing and older individuals may have difficulty reaching medical care or shopping for daily necessities. As indicated in Table 2, the disabled and the elderly do not have the extent of On Demand public bus service that was once standard in Lorain County. The poverty level in Lorain County is approximately 14.2% and the unemployment rate is 8.7%. As noted in the LWVOA transit study data provided below, 42% of respondents use public transit for employment and 33.9% use public transit for medical appointments.

## **RESULTS OF THE LWVOA SURVEY**

**Characteristics of Survey Responders.** A total of 223 individuals responded to the transportation survey. The characteristics of survey responders are summarized in Table 3 [2]. While survey results will be briefly summarized in this report, more detailed data are available at the LWVOA website including survey replies to

specific questions, and responders’ comments on the various transportation issues [2]. It should be noted that not all responders answered every question in the survey, thus the number of total responses varies with each question.

| <b>CHARACTERISTICS</b> | <b>GROUP</b>         | <b>PERCENTAGE</b> | <b>TOTAL RESPONSES</b> |
|------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| Total Surveys Received |                      |                   | 223                    |
| Gender                 | Female               | 60.6              | 198                    |
|                        | Male                 | 37.4              |                        |
|                        | Prefer not to answer | 2.0               |                        |
| Primary Language       | English              | 99.0              | 197                    |
|                        | Spanish              | 1.0               |                        |
| Ethnicity              | Caucasian            | 80.8              | 193                    |
|                        | African-American     | 11.9              |                        |
|                        | Asian                | 2.6               |                        |
|                        | Latino/a             | 6.2               |                        |
|                        | Native American      | 3.1               |                        |
| Age                    | 13-24                | 9.4               | 192                    |
|                        | 25-44                | 18.2              |                        |
|                        | 45-64                | 47.9              |                        |
|                        | 65 and over          | 24.5              |                        |
| Mobility Impaired      | Yes                  | 10.4              | 193                    |
|                        | No                   | 80.3              |                        |
|                        | Sometimes            | 9.3               |                        |

**Public Transportation Usage.** A majority of responders (61.8%) had never been on a Lorain County Transit (LCT) bus while 36.8% had taken LCT public transportation at some time. Most responders, however (77.1%) answered that they did not use public transportation. A majority (76.7%) of responders had access to a car, and 57.5% of car owners preferred using a personal vehicle compared to 18.2% of owners who would take public transportation whenever possible. If the usual vehicle was not available, 85% of responders stated they would use family, friends, or neighbors.

Responses to questions regarding reasons for taking or not taking public transportation are summarized in Table 4. Unavailability of public transportation was the major reason (56% of responders) for not using this service. For people using public transportation, the major reason cited was work (42%) followed closely by shopping (39.3%) and entertainment/family/social (39.3%).

| <b>Reasons why public transportation is <u>not</u> used.</b> |                  | <b>Reasons why public transportation is <u>is</u> used.</b> |                  |
|--|------------------|---|------------------|
| <b>Answer Choices</b>  | <b>Responses</b> | <b>Answer Choices</b>                                       | <b>Responses</b> |
| Not available  | 56.0%            | Work  | 42.0%            |
| Inconvenient   | 30%              | School or post-secondary ed.                                | 27.7%            |

|                                     |       |                             |       |
|-------------------------------------|-------|-----------------------------|-------|
| Inefficient                         | 16%   | Shopping                    | 39.3% |
| Does not go to places I want to go. | 44.7% | Travel                      | 26.8% |
| Confusing schedules                 | 19.3% | Entertainment/family/social | 39.3% |
| Am not familiar with it.            | 26.7% | Medical appointments        | 33.9% |
| Total Responses                     | 150   | Total Responses             | 112   |

**Perceptions of Existing Public Transportation.** In this and the following question, responders were asked to note whether they would agree strongly, agree, disagree, or disagree strongly with statements regarding public transportation. On issues of whether fares were reasonably priced or vehicles were clean and well-maintained, a majority of responders expressing an opinion agreed with these statements (26-34%). Most responders (48-55%) however indicated that they had no opinion, most likely reflecting the low percentage of public transportation users among responders. With respect to bus routes, frequency of buses, and bus stops, most responders disagreed strongly (33-55%) that the existing status was adequate.

**Level of Interest in Changing/Modifying Public Transportation.** In response to statements regarding need for improvement or expansion of LCT, a majority of responders (84-87%) either strongly agreed or agreed with these statements. With respect to specific changes such as instituting bus service to the Cleveland airport or RTA station, most (49.7%) responders agreed strongly that they would use this service. The issue of supporting a sales tax for expansion/improvement of LCT drew both strong agreement (51.3%) and agreement (25.6%), totaling 76.9% of all responders.

### Proposed Public Transportation Criteria

The Study Committee recommends that the LWVOA reach a consensus on adopting the following criteria in formulating a position statement on public transportation. In considering the pros and cons of each criterion, many of the points raised were derived from responses to the LWVOA Survey.

**Public Transit Criterion #1: Safety and Sustainability.** Public transit should provide a safe and affordable ridership experience for all riders (including the disabled and elderly) in a system designed for safety, efficiency, and financial sustainability.

**Criterion #1 Background. Safety.** Overall, public transit systems are an extremely safe way to travel. For transit bus travel, there were 0.05 deaths reported compared to 1.42 deaths for motor vehicle travel [APTA, fig 16]. Professional transportation consultants stress safety and sustainability as well as efficiency for transit systems moving people across cities or wider geographic areas [12]. Safety must be considered in designing the infrastructure, routing, and ridership experience. The legislative agenda adopted by the Northeast Ohio Area-wide Coordinating Agency (NOACA) includes incorporation of safety and sustainability with multimodal travel planning within state and local transits [6, 7]. In a recent transportation study sponsored by the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC), public transit was studied in a number of cities, including Cleveland [5]. Riders in Cleveland (and other cities studied) did not have an issue with ridership safety. In the LWVOA study of Lorain County public transit, however, riders' opinions were divided concerning bus safety. In response to the statement "Safety is of no concern." 28.3% strongly agreed/agreed while 29.9% strongly disagreed/disagreed [2]. These results suggest that ridership safety is an important issue to be addressed in any expansion of Lorain County Transit.

**Consensus Question #1a.** Should ridership safety be a major factor in evaluating public transit?

|     |     |
|-----|-----|
| PRO | CON |
|-----|-----|

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Public transit is safer than driving.   | Some people are afraid of crowds on buses.   |
| Riding the bus avoids the stress of driving, especially in bad weather.                       | Crowds can be a source of infectious diseases.   |
| Transit buses are configured to provide safe entry and exit for the elderly and the disabled. | Bus stop access can be very difficult and dangerous (lack of sidewalks, street crossings, etc.). |

**Criterion #1 Sustainability.** Sustainability of public transit is dependent upon reliable sources of dedicated funding. A permanent tax is key to maintaining public transit systems. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, every dollar of local tax money invested in public transit generates \$3 in economic growth [9]. It has been pointed out above that Lorain County is giving back to both the State of Ohio and the Federal Government, large sums of money which will no longer be spent in our area. It is important to realize that local money can serve as seed money. Local money when combined with State money can enable receipt of Federal money at up to a 4X multiple. Generating government funding also helps to maintain lower fees for riders. This leverage system is not unique to public transportation but is also used to subsidize highways as well as public water and sewer systems. For example, this leverage helped build our neighbor, Cleveland's new Health Line route which generated approximately \$115 in economic development benefits for every \$1 invested [10].

Currently, Lorain County does not have a dedicated fund for public transit and two property tax levies have been defeated in the past few years. Other forms of taxation, for example, income or gas taxes, are even less likely to succeed. In fact, the State is considering replacing some income tax with sales taxes. At this time not even our federal government has succeeded in raising the existing gas tax to restore the Highway Trust Fund, which will shortly be insolvent, and raising income taxes is not popular. It is unlikely however, that Lorain County public transit can be improved without generating some additional local tax funding in the form of a small sales tax which would be shared by all county residents rather than just property owners alone. In a successful public transit system as illustrated by Stark County, Ohio, passenger fares, local, state, and Federal funding are all utilized [10]. Stark County is very similar to Lorain County in population and extent of urban and rural areas but Stark County has a dedicated transit fund in the form of a sales tax [10]. In the LWVOA Lorain County transit survey described above, 76.9% of responders agreed with the concept of a local sales tax to support public transit. This survey showed that a level of interest in public transit still persists within Lorain County. In pursuing public transit expansion, it will be critical to explain to voters what their tax dollars will provide for the county. Adding to the complexity of this task is that outside funding from various sources (Northeast Ohio Coordinating Agency [NOACA], State and Federal governments) will not kick in until transit projects have been identified, received local tax support, and grant applications made and approved. The lowest costs to the county derive from an ongoing stable funding process.

**Consensus Question #1b.** Should a public transit system be sustained by a permanent local tax such as a sales tax?

| PRO  | CON  |
|--|--|
| Public transit is less expensive than maintaining a car even with a local transit tax.                 | It is not fair for non-riders to pay a tax to support public transit riders. |
| A dedicated local transit tax generates matching state and federal funding which helps keep fares low. | The county already has enough taxes.   |
| There is no way to bring county public transit into the 21 <sup>st</sup>                               | The county had dedicated transit management and funding                      |

|  |   |
|--|---|
| century without a dedicated local tax. | once and eliminated it because of cost. |
|--|---|

**Public Transit Criterion #2:** A good public transit system should provide improved mobility, better access to jobs, educational and medical facilities, and especially the economic and cultural life of the community.

**Criterion #2 Background.** Targeted investments in public transit to connect population centers have been shown to improve workforce mobility and promote local economies [8]. A national study shows that both liberals and conservatives support better public transit [5]. Public transit investments increase property values and promote development opportunities [6]. Overall, since 2004, public transit use has increased to a greater extent than use of highway travel [1, figure 2]. As mentioned above, millennials are not as interested in driving as previous generations and prefer using public transit [9]. Currently Lorain County has no public transit connection with adjacent Cuyahoga County which frustrates access of employers to employees and vice versa. The existing Lorain County transit system is composed of four lines serving the Elyria-Lorain urban area. This is not an ideal system for servicing needs of younger people who use public transit to reach educational centers (some in Wellington) or for seniors who need to reach medical facilities, some of which are now located in Avon. In the LWVOA survey described above, a majority of respondents stated that they used public transit for a variety of purposes, including educational, medical, shopping, and recreational needs. The majority of respondents were dissatisfied with the lack of public transit networks to meet these needs.

**Consensus Question 2a.** Should a transit system connect with major areas of employment, shopping, educational and medical facilities as well as cultural and other venues?

| PRO   | CON   |
|---|---|
| Public transit helps the economy by connecting employees with workplaces.                         | Not enough people use public transit to justify a complex system with many routes to different places.    |
| Public transit promotes access to educational opportunities by serving broad areas of the county. | The rural nature of Lorain County limits the capacity of public transit to serve all areas of the county. |
| Many businesses rely on transit as a way to reach their customers.                                | Residents of Lorain County like their private cars and will not want to try public transit.               |
| A good public transit system will help to promote population growth and retain younger people.    | Public transit requires long wait times and is not convenient to most people.                             |

**Consensus Question 2b.** To promote public participation in the regional economy, should transit systems cross county lines?

| PRO   | CON   |
|---|---|
| Northeast Ohio counties will benefit economically from connecting across county lines.  | Lorain County should focus on updating internal transit only. |
| Lorain County residents now have to rely on private means to travel to adjacent Cuyahoga County for access to employment, air travel, medical centers, and major cultural events. | Management of inter-county transit will be too expensive.     |

**Consensus Question 2c.** To promote public participation in the local economy, should transit systems focus on urban areas or extend to rural regions of a given county?

| PRO  | CON   |
|--|---|
| Extending transit systems throughout urban and rural areas promotes economic growth by giving businesses better access to employees and customers. | Transit systems do best in urban areas because of the population density.       |
| Stark County, OH, is an example of a successful public transit system which includes both urban and rural areas throughout the county [10].        | Rural areas in the county are so dispersed that public transit is not feasible. |

**Public Transit Criterion #3:** Public transit systems should utilize environmentally-friendly transportation vehicles and networks so as to preserve natural resources and promote public health.

**Criterion #3 Background.** Compared to private automobiles, public transit conserves energy and improves air quality by reducing greenhouse gas emissions [1]. The predominant land use pattern in Ohio shows sprawling residential and commercial growth which has led to more roads with greater traffic problems. Efficient use of public transit can reduce road congestion while saving energy [1]. Efficient targeting of public transit systems can play a role in shaping the regional economy by attracting mixed use development of existing communities thus enhancing population densities and avoiding further sprawl [8]. This approach would help to preserve land use for environmental conservation, recreation, or farming. Current public transit systems are designed to be more fuel efficient with less carbon emissions than previous types. Ideally, both land use planning and transit planning should occur at the same time with an eye to a 20-year horizon [13].

**Consensus Question 3a.** Should transit systems be designed to minimize environmental pollution and energy consumption?

| PRO  | CON   |
|--|---|
| Public transit reduces air pollution compared to private automobiles.                        | Buses are not always full – this wastes fuel.     |
| Public transit can reduce road traffic congestion.   | Energy-efficient transit systems are very costly. |
| Public transit is efficient by moving more individuals per vehicle than private automobiles. | Air pollution is not a major problem anymore.     |

**Criterion # 4.** A public transit system should provide an alternative for vulnerable individuals who cannot drive, such as individuals who are disabled or elderly.

**Criterion #4-Background.** By federal mandate (Americans with Disabilities Act), public transit facilities must be accessible to the disabled. For vulnerable individuals, public transit increases access to health care, human services, job training, and quality of life trips for shopping and personal appointments [10]. Data show that Ohioans are getting older and poorer, especially in rural areas [8]. Nearly 90% of elderly individuals would prefer to stay in their homes for as long as possible rather than move to other facilities [7]. In order to allow the elderly to do this, public transportation is essential. As noted previously above, the LWVOA transit survey indicated that most responders were unfamiliar with public transportation and had no opinion of services. Of those responders who expressed an opinion, the majority disagreed that services were adequate for either the elderly (69.3%) or disabled (60.8%).

Currently Lorain County has a door-to door demand-response paratransit service which supplements the standard “fixed route” systems. The service is termed “Dial a Ride” and operates on weekdays from 5:30 AM to 6:30 PM. Reservations can be made up to two weeks in advance. As noted in Table 2, after the dramatic reduction of fixed route service from 14 routes to only 4 routes in 2010, a similar steep decline occurred in Dial-a-Ride service. The cause of this decline may be due to cessation of service to some areas. To supplement Lorain County services, the City of Oberlin contracts with Lorain County Transit to provide a hybrid demand-response transit service in Oberlin on Mondays and Thursdays, with service to Elyria and Lorain on Thursdays. This local demand-response service is made possible by financing from private businesses and non-profit groups in Oberlin. For medical needs, the only other paratransit service in Lorain County open to the disabled or elderly is provided by Goodwill Industries. In addition, the Veterans Administration (VA) supports a paratransit service exclusively for Lorain County veterans so that they can access VA hospitals which are all located in Cuyahoga County.

**Criterion #4a – Question.** Should public transit systems provide paratransit “demand-response” service for vulnerable individuals to an area beyond the present boundaries?

| PRO   | CON   |
|---|---|
| Public paratransit “demand-response” service is needed to provide mobility to vulnerable populations who may not be able to afford private transport. | Demand-response transit service is too expensive for Lorain County and should be left to social service agencies. |
| Public paratransit services are needed to assure that vulnerable populations receive access to medical care and other essential facilities.           | Paratransit fares are too high.   |
| Demand for paratransit service is expected to increase as the population ages.  | It is difficult for riders to arrange a trip on short notice.   |

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