

March 4th, 2024

To: The Federal Rail Administration (FRA)

Re: Ohioans with Disabilities need increased passenger rail connections in NW Ohio to have access to a fully multimodal transit system that fits their diverse needs.

Please accept these comments on the FRA's recently release Proposed Preferred Routes that on behalf of The Ability Center of Greater Toledo. We were thrilled to see the FRA propose a passenger rail corridor that would begin at Detroit, Michigan and end at New Orleans, LA. The Selected Proposed Preferred Route would stop in our community of Toledo, Ohio, and it would allow Toledo residents with disabilities to access Detroit and Columbus. This faster, easier access would promote equitable access to jobs, education, entertainment, and social connections for those with disabilities in our region.

The Ability Center of Greater Toledo is a Center for Independent Living which serves 13 counties in NW Ohio. Our mission is to make Toledo the most disability friendly in the nation by increasing independence for people with disabilities, discovering true passions, and changing the community's perception of disability.

The development of passenger rail connections in NW Ohio and beyond will increase the independence of Ohioans with disabilities, as the current public transit system is underserved and underfunded.

It has long been recognized that public transit is key to the civil rights and independence of people with disabilities. For many, it is impossible to reliably get to employment, education, medical care, and socialization without a strong, multi-modal public transit system. Passenger rail is important for the independence of people with disabilities because it supplements local transit systems, forms more connections between cities, and can allow for a more accessible alternative to air travel.

The disability community needs rail connections to NW Ohio to have a fully disability-friendly community. Right now, the federal government has set aside funding to increase passenger rail in Ohio.¹ Taking advantage of these funds is key to ensuring the state of Ohio has adequate support(s) for the

¹ 2035. Amtrak Connects US. (2023, June 20).

<https://www.amtrakconnectsus.com/#::~:~:text=More%20Trains%20for%20More%20People,passenger%20and%20freight%20rail%20improvement>
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independence of people with disabilities, if the routes that are developed are affordable, accessible and connect to every area of the state.²

We are appreciative and supportive of the FRA’s proposed long-distance corridor between Toledo and New Orleans, and we believe this initiative would bridge the gap between existing state-sponsored corridors by connecting Detroit-Toledo-Columbus and increase independence for Ohioans with disabilities.

In 2023, The Ability Center of Greater Toledo conducted a survey and gathered over 500 responses from NW Ohioans with and without disabilities concerning the need/want for increased passenger rail connections. One question asked respondents what city they most wanted a passenger rail connection to; **88.43%** wanted a connection to **Columbus**.³ In addition, the survey was analyzed for major themes. They are as follows:⁴

1. There is a strong interest in increased passenger rail in NW Ohio from residents with and without disabilities amongst adults aged 25 through 65+. This is true even from respondents who do not use public transit regularly.
2. NW Ohio Residents with and without disabilities would like to be connected by inter-city rail to all major cities in Ohio and Southern Michigan, **especially Columbus**.
3. Increased Inter-City Rail Connections would benefit NW Ohio’s Cultural, Social, and Economic Connections.
4. The current Inter-City Rail Connections do not meet those needs because they are limited in availability, slow, expensive, and not accessible to people with disabilities.

The proposed long-distance corridor between Toledo and New Orleans would not only fill in the gap between the state sponsored corridors (Detroit-Toledo-Columbus) but increase the personal mobility of Ohioans with disabilities by giving them the freedom to travel the states along the route.

The development of passenger rail connections in Northwest Ohio is crucial for advancing the independence of individuals with disabilities. With federal funding allocated for rail expansion, there's a unique opportunity to address the underserved needs of Ohioans with disabilities. **By supporting initiatives such as the proposed Toledo to New Orleans long-distance corridor and ensuring affordability, accessibility, and comprehensive coverage that fills existing gaps, Ohio can be better equipped to serve all our community members.**

² 2035. Amtrak Connects US. (2023, June 20).

<https://www.amtrakconnectsus.com/#:~:text=More%20Trains%20for%20More%20People,passenger%20and%20freight%20rail%20improvement>

³ *Advocacy*. The Ability Center. (2024, January 3). <https://abilitycenter.org/advocacy/>

⁴ *Advocacy*. The Ability Center. (2024, January 3). <https://abilitycenter.org/advocacy/>