



# COTA Rail Plan World Class Opportunity for Columbus

*By Rich Sensenbrenner, January 2004*

**R**obert H. Milbourne, president and chief executive of the Columbus Partnership, highlighted a key issue for our city when he said you should be “aggressively focusing on the future of your community at all times” (Jan 18th Columbus Dispatch, “Partnership looks to shape area’s future”).

I enthusiastically support the efforts of the Columbus Partnership, a group of business leaders formed to encourage civic improvements and economic development. However, the Dispatch articles didn’t mention the critical economic development tool that’s the foundation of a successful future for Columbus: light rail.

Cities across the country – including every peer city listed in last Sunday’s articles – recognize that electrified light rail spurs economic development, increases property values along the route, brings vibrancy to downtown areas, and reduces sprawl. Our competitors have light rail or are planning systems for the near future. Why? Because they know the investments they make in rail today will pay great dividends for decades to come.

## A Short History

Since 1999, when voters approved a permanent operating levy to fund Central Ohio Transit Authority (COTA) with a quarter cent sales tax, COTA has been methodically improving bus service and looking to the future to determine how to best meet the mobility needs of Central Ohio’s growing population.



**Neighborhood Shuttle**

COTA has introduced smaller vehicles, replaced aging 40-foot buses, and partnered with the Ohio State University, Columbus State, Capitol University and Columbus College of Art and Design to provide students with bus passes. It has opened

### **DALLAS, TEXAS**

*The Initial Economic Impacts of the DART LRT System*  
Bernard L. Weinstein & Terry L. Clower, July 1999.

*Values of properties adjoining DART light rail stations grew 25% more than similar properties not served by the rail system. Proximity to DART light rail stations appears to be a plus for most classes of real estate, especially Class A and C office buildings and strip retail. Average occupancies for Class A buildings near rail increased from 80% in 1994 to 88.5 percent in 1998, while rents increased from an average \$15.60/sf to \$23. Strip retailers near the stations registered a 49.5% gain in occupancy and a 64.8% improvement in rental rates.*

Source: Center for Economic Development and Research, University of North Texas, PO Box 310469 Denton, TX 76203

**COTA RAIL PLAN  
WORLD CLASS OPPORTUNITY FOR COLUMBUS**

a transit and daycare center in Linden, which has helped revitalize the Four Corners area, and connected moms and dads with jobs, and kids with school and daycare.

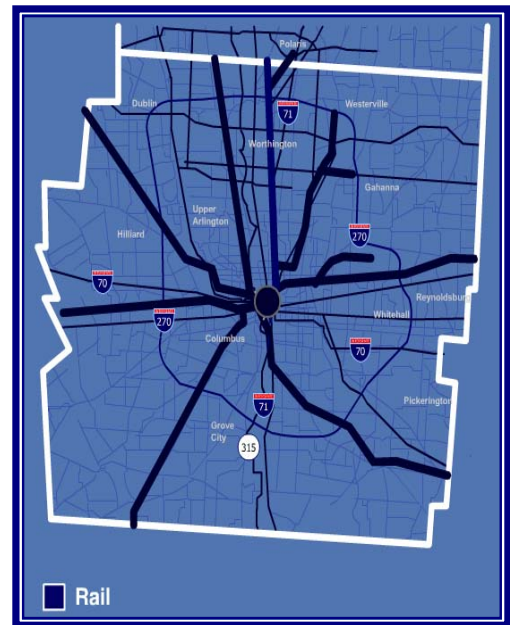
But in 1999 voters weren't ready to move ahead with plans to build rail throughout Columbus. Even though COTA presented a vision of eight rail lines and 24-hour bus service, residents seemed to say they wanted COTA to first prove its ability to manage a permanent sales tax. They also wanted more detail about where the first rail line might be built, and how their neighborhoods might benefit.

While hit by difficult financial times, and despite being one of the nation's most under-funded urban transit systems, COTA has made wise use of its limited resources.

The transit agency has cut unproductive bus service while adding innovative neighborhood routes. It has secured federal funding for more buses and won national awards for its innovative Access to Jobs programs and Linden-area improvements.

As a regular bus rider, I have firsthand experience with these improvements. The buses I take are clean, on time, and usually get me where I need to go. Is it perfect? No. Recent service cuts make it impossible to run more buses, more often, to more places, which is what I would really like to see. But COTA has improved its operations in tough economic times, and they should be applauded for it.

While COTA has strived for excellence during difficult times, so has the City of Columbus. Mayor Michael B. Coleman and civic leaders recognize that loss of business and retail activity in Downtown Columbus – including a 22 percent office vacancy rate, one of the worst in the nation -- is a crisis that could jeopardize the economic competitiveness of the entire region. With input from the public and community leaders alike, the mayor's revitalization plans include new development along the Riverfront and south of the statehouse, plus an ambitious goal to build 10,000 new residential units downtown by 2012. Two thousand units are already in the works, and of course the Arena District is a resounding success.



COTA's 8-line rail vision, including the "North Corridor" line in blue that runs between Downtown Columbus and Polaris and numerous transit centers that would serve rail and bus lines throughout the region.

**SUCCESS OF LIGHT RAIL TRANSIT**

Hampton Roads Transit: The Benefits of Light Rail Transit

Ridership on the nation's light rail systems continues to rise. During the months of July, August, and September of 2000, more than 81.1 million passenger trips were registered on light rail systems across the country, up from 72.7 million in the same three months of 1999. Ridership also rose in the third quarter of 2000 over the year's second quarter by more than 4%. Both new and old light rail projects continue to popular with riders. Ridership increases include Portland, Oregon's Tri-Met system with a 7.5% increase in ridership; Boston also saw a 7.5% increase; New Jersey Transit saw a 7.4% increase, and Baltimore's Light Rail system saw ridership increasing by 6.1%.

Source: [www.hrtransit.org/LRT](http://www.hrtransit.org/LRT)

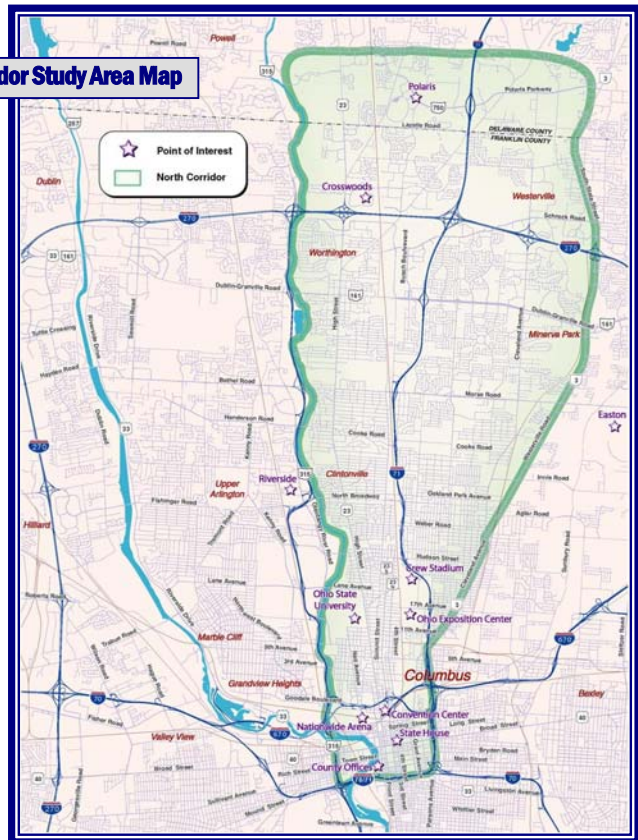
But being “world-class competitive,” as recommended in the Dispatch by Ed Malecki, professor of geography and director of OSU’s Center for Urban and Regional Analysis, requires more than just great destinations. It requires the ability to get there. Great cities have great airports, great freight access, and great transit service. Columbus is fortunate that exciting initiatives are happening in these areas, but its support for transit has been woefully inadequate in the past. We now have a critical opportunity to change that.

## COTA’s Light Rail Plan

COTA has fleshed out a detailed plan for rail service, and has met every stiff requirement in the federally mandated process to determine whether rail makes sense in Columbus. The unqualified answer is Yes. The analysis, conducted by national experts, has shown that the initial light rail line in Columbus will attract at least 17,600 riders daily and spark new investment in neighborhoods along the line.

Public opinion polls done by many organizations in recent years show wide support for passenger trains in Central Ohio. Experience in other cities has shown that rail revitalizes once-vacant downtowns by reducing office occupancy rates, increasing foot traffic, and attracting the “creative class” of artists, ad agencies, and retail activity that give a city character and vibrancy.

I have participated in COTA’s aggressive efforts to seek public input to shape its rail plan, both by serving on advisory committees and attending public meetings. In 2000, I co-founded the “Bacon, Eggs and Rail,” an informal group designed to bring together transportation officials and citizens to learn how county, city, highway, transit, aviation, and freight projects can



Corridor Study Area Map

### WASHINGTON DC AND ATLANTA, GEORGIA

Rail Transit & Joint  
Development: Land market  
impacts in Washington, DC &  
Atlanta  
Robert Cervero, 1994.

Data were examined for five rail stations in the Washington DC and Atlanta areas. Average office rents near stations rose with system wide ridership; joint development projects added more than three dollars per gross square foot to annual office rents. Office vacancy rates were lower, average building densities higher, and shares of regional growth larger in station areas with joint development projects. Where regional market conditions are favorable, rail transit appears capable of positive impacts on station area office.

Source: Journal of the American Planning Association V60n1 (Winter, 1994) pages 83-94. American Planning Association

work together to reduce traffic congestion – and spark economic investment – in Greater Columbus.

These firsthand experiences make me confident and enthusiastic about COTA's plans to build light rail in Columbus. The first leg, called the "North Corridor," would travel 13 miles between the Polaris area and the Brewery District. It would serve neighborhoods and businesses at Crosswoods, Worthington, Clintonville, OSU, Short North, and Downtown, connecting the Arena District to the Brewery District. It would restore bus service cuts, increase frequency on productive routes, and boost door-to-door service for people with disabilities by almost 90 percent.

By participating in this process and studying other cities with rail service, I've learned that light rail serves as a catalyst on many fronts:

#### **More jobs and economic growth**

It takes electricians, engineers, and skilled labor to design and build rail projects. Studies by the American Public Transit Association show that every \$10 million invested in transit creates 314 jobs and more than \$60 million in revenue. Small and large businesses alike benefit from rail construction activity.

After the rail line is built, the certainty of those steel tracks attracts businesses to locate along the line. In Portland, Oregon, there has been \$2.9 billion in development along its 33-mile rail line, including new retail outlets and condominiums. Rail, in concert with policies that stimulate business investment around rail stations, has revived Portland's once-dying downtown and focused growth to preserve farmland, rather than indiscriminately consuming it. Similarly, St. Louis has identified \$2.2 billion in development along its 34 miles of rail, and Dallas has seen downtown retail activity increase 30 percent.



Portland, Oregon's light rail attracts 80,000 riders a day, and has spurred \$2.9 billion in development along the rail lines.

#### **Increased property values and downtown occupancy rates**

Experience demonstrates that people want to be near rail stops to conveniently get to jobs and other activities. As a result, property values along rail routes generally increase. In Dallas, property values near its light rail line rose an average of 25% faster than similar properties not located near light rail, and

#### **DO PROPERTY VALUES USUALLY GO UP OR DOWN NEAR LRT?**

Safety and Livability Near Light Rail Transit – Top 10 Questions and Answers

*In other cities, adjacent residential and commercial property values within ½ mile of LRT stations are higher than comparable properties without LRT.*

*Lease rates at commercial developments and rental residential property also tend to be higher. The largest positive property value and lease impacts are most likely to occur where the stations are physically closer to existing development and to available developable land.*

*Source: Metropolitan Council-Transportation-Hiawatha Light Rail Transit*

**WILL LRT BE NOISY,  
SMELLY AND  
GENERATE  
POLLUTION?**

Safety and Livability Near Light Rail Transit – Top 10 Questions and Answers

LRT is quieter and cleaner than automobile traffic on Hwy. 55 and slightly louder than a lawn mower. Light rail tracks, unlike most railroad tracks, are continuously welded eliminating the loud "clicking" noise. Trains are loudest where tracks curve. Use of light rail vehicle horns and gate arm bells will be regulated to ensure safety at crossings.

Light rail will reduce air pollution by offering an alternative to fossil-fueled vehicles. Because light rail is electrically powered, it doesn't cause emissions that contribute to urban ozone and smog.

Source: Metropolitan Council-Transportation-Hiawatha Light Rail Transit



*Pedestrian-oriented development with convenient access to rail stations as illustrated here on Summit Street, has helped increase property values along rail lines across the US.*

Class A office space occupancy rates rose 8.5 percent over just four years of rail service.

Not only will the Downtown greatly benefit, but so will the neighborhoods. In Boston, residential property values grew by an estimated 6.7%, and a \$500 million mixed-used development sprang up in what was formerly a depressed part of the city. Along the Shaker Heights line in Cleveland, property values continue to rise.

Realtors in many rail cities now advertise a property's proximity to rail stations, knowing it will attract more renters and buyers. In anticipation of the Columbus rail line, MORPC has already drafted zoning regulations calling for mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented development around proposed rail stops.

**More riders**

Using the Federal Transit Administration's conservative forecasting methods, COTA predicts the line will attract at least 17,600 riders a day by 2025 – 6,700 new to transit. St. Louis had a similar forecast, but within five years after opening 44,000 people were riding the system daily, and 80 percent of them were new to transit. Dallas underestimated ridership, too, and is now building new parking lots and extending its rail line to accommodate the additional crowds. Riders have also flocked to new rail systems in Denver, Salt Lake, Baltimore and elsewhere, spurring a 21 percent increase in transit ridership nationwide.

**Improved freight movement**

Columbus' central location – within a day's drive of 60 percent of the nation's population – has made it a distribution and warehousing center. But the tremendous growth in truck traffic volume in Ohio, now the nation's third heaviest, threatens our ability to move both goods and people throughout Central Ohio. Traffic jams threaten "just in time" delivery and jeopardize our competitive edge as a leading distribution hub.

COTA's plan calls for shifting some of the freight railroad operations out of the existing I-71 rail corridor to make room for new light rail tracks. It would also construct a new CSX intermodal center in central Ohio. This would improve rail freight movement and expand intermodal capacity for all area shippers, like

Honda and the Limited. In fact, COTA's analysis shows that more than \$40 million a year could be saved in shipping costs region-wide.

COTA has already secured preliminary agreements with CSX and Norfolk-Southern, the leading railroads in Central Ohio, to pursue this strategy. Both railroads have given nods to COTA for working so closely with them to both meet passenger needs and actually increase freight railroad capacity to move goods through Central Ohio. The result? A win-win-win strategy that improves the railroads' ability to serve their business customers, makes room for passenger rail, and actually reduces truck traffic on our highways – keeping our highways safer and preserving our competitive edge.



**PUBLIC  
TRANSPORTATION  
RIDERSHIP ON THE  
INCREASE**

Hampton Roads Transit: The  
Benefits of Light Rail Transit

*More and more commuters are choosing public transportation according to the American Public Transportation Association (APTA). For the first quarter of this year, the nation's public transportation systems have recorded a 2.8% increase in ridership over the same period in 2000. This quarterly increase in ridership builds on last year's year-end total of 9.4 billion trips, the highest peak in annual ridership in more than 40 years. In the last five years, ridership has increased by 21%. The first quarter increase was broad-based with every mode of transportation posting an increase in riders. Among the transit modes, light rail showed the largest increase of 6.4%. This was followed by heavy rail at 5.5%; commuter rail at 4.3%; and bus systems at 1.37%.*

Source: [www.hrtransit.org/LRT](http://www.hrtransit.org/LRT)

**Less commuting means more time with families and friends**

Idling in traffic backups is more than a hassle – it takes us away from our families and our jobs. The average Central Ohioan spends 40 hours stuck in traffic each year. Riding a train to and from work gives back productive time to read a book, work on a laptop, or make a few calls without causing a wreck. Knowing that traffic tie-ups won't wreak havoc on their schedules, commuters in other cities have found the reliability of a train schedule gives peace-of-mind, too.

**You don't have to ride public transportation to benefit**

Without public transportation, there would be more cars on our highways each day. COTA carries over 55,000 riders a day that could be using our roadways instead. According to the American Public Transit Association, if one in 10



**Summit Street – Curb Running  
(Could be Center Running)**

Americans used public transportation

regularly, the U.S. reliance on foreign oil could be cut by more than 40 percent--the amount we import from Saudi Arabia each year.

On a more personal note, I am one of more than 8,500 riders who ride COTA to Buckeye games each

football Saturday, leaving more parking spaces for those who drive to the games. So even if you've never ridden a bus or a train, you'll benefit if Columbus increases its investment in public transportation.

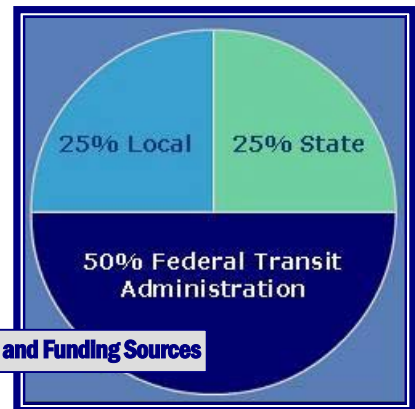
**The first part of a regional, balanced transportation network**

Central Ohio’s population is predicted to increase by 400,000 in the next 15 years. That’s like inviting everyone in Cleveland to move in with us. It adds up to 55 more people a day – with 48 of them bringing cars. To handle these newcomers, and the traffic they bring with them, we must act now to make sure our highways, airports, and transit system are up to the task. COTA’s rail plan is an important component in meeting these increased needs.

Why start with just one line? It would be nice to build the entire eight rail lines at once, but competition for Federal funds is fierce, and funds trickle out only one project at a time. After extensive analysis and public input, the North Corridor line already meets stringent FTA criteria: it has one third of the region’s jobs and residents, the most households without a car, the majority of the region’s top destinations, and is most likely to attract new riders to transit.

**Seventy-five percent paid by state and federal funds**

These factors helped the FTA award COTA’s rail plan the highly coveted “recommended” rating. FTA already anticipates paying half of its \$500 million cost, and the Ohio Department of Transportation expects to receive a request for 25 percent of the cost. The remaining fourth would be raised by asking voters for another quarter cent sales tax. This would mean five cents on every ten dollar non-food purchase would go toward public transportation – taking COTA back to the funding it had in 1985, before well-intentioned county leaders took away half of COTA’s sales tax authority.



This sounds expensive. It is true that transportation investments – trains, highways, and airports -- are costly. Rebuilding the I-70/71 “split” through Downtown is estimated to cost at least \$500 million to \$600 million. Although it represents just six percent of the freeway system in Franklin County, like rail, it is a critical investment that will improve the safety and travel experience for all those who travel through downtown for decades to come.

**Reversing sprawl**

Some may charge that building a rail line from Downtown to south of Polaris induces sprawl. They’ll say it will allow businesses to locate further out and give suburbanites easy access to Downtown jobs. Both are true. But a regional transportation system organized around rail is by far more preferable over the current highway-only approach. Rail reinforces Downtown as Central Ohio’s premier office location, while revitalizing our older neighborhoods and first ring suburbs. Just as important, as growth occurs in rural areas, development can be

**SANTA CLARA COUNTY**

Transit’s value-added: effects of light and commuter rail services on commercial land values  
Robert Cevero & Michael Duncan,  
November 2001

*This research uncovered significant capitalization benefits on commercial properties of proximity to rail transit. Being within walking distance of a LRT station in Santa Clara County CA, increased land values on average by over \$4.00 per square foot, or by around 23 percent. And for properties in commercial business districts and within a quarter mile of a CalTrain commuter rail stop, the capitalization premium was even larger - over \$25 per square foot or more than 120 percent above the mean property value.*

Source: Transportation Research Board, 81st Annual Meeting presentation January 2002.

focused around rail stations, thus preserving more farmland and protecting natural resources like the Big Darby Watershed.

### A Streetcar Isn't Desired

The Capital City Transit Coalition floated the idea of running a streetcar, or electrified trolley, on High Street between Downtown and OSU, instead of the more commuter-oriented light rail system.

Short North – Curb Running  
(Could be Center Running)



At first blush the streetcar sounds great. It's cheaper, and a nostalgic-looking trolley appeals to our sense of history. But, with a price tag as high as \$100 million to build and a few million dollars a

year to operate, a streetcar would still require the same quarter cent sales tax increase, which by state statute is COTA's minimum option.

Also, unlike COTA's 13-mile line proposal, the three-mile streetcar would not be a viable commuting alternative for residents north of Clintonville, and thus would attract only a fraction of the riders, and do little to ease congestion on I-71.

Most critical, the recommended rating COTA has secured is a significant accomplishment that should not be taken lightly. The streetcar has not been through the rigorous analysis required to secure federal funds. The streetcar actually takes COTA back to the drawing board and scraps years of research and development. It also turns its back on a quarter billion in federal funds already in line for Columbus.

It may also be possible to build the light rail segment from Downtown to OSU first. So, for the same local investment, Columbus can get a \$500 million light rail line that moves us toward a truly regional, multi-modal transportation network. The streetcar, on the other hand, derails the chance for rail in Columbus, possibly for decades.

Light rail does not solve all a city's ills, and it is not the only key to becoming a world-class city. Yet it has proven, time and again, to be the fundamental strategy in revitalizing cities and making them strong enough to compete in the global marketplace.

#### FAMILY SPENDING BUDGET

Hampton Roads Transit: The Benefits of Light Rail Transit

Transportation accounts for approximately 17 percent of our Gross Domestic Product, which means transportation is critical to business and personal economic security. For American families, transportation represents 18 % of household spending, the second largest expenditure after housing. Americans living in transit intensive metropolitan areas save \$22 billion per year in transportation related expenses.

Source: [www.hrtransit.org/LRT](http://www.hrtransit.org/LRT)



**COTA RAIL PLAN  
WORLD CLASS OPPORTUNITY FOR COLUMBUS**

**BUSINESS GAIN IN SALES**

Hampton Roads Transit: The Benefits of Light Rail Transit

Businesses would realize a gain in sales of three times the public sector investment in transit capital - a \$10 million investment results in a \$30 million gain in sales.

Regarding transit operations spending, businesses would see a \$32 million increase in business sales for each \$10 million in transit operations spending.

Source: [www.hrtransit.org/LRT](http://www.hrtransit.org/LRT)

As a city councilman, the grandson of a Columbus mayor, and a great believer in this wonderful city of ours, I see this as a critical juncture in our path toward making Columbus the truly great city it can be. We have a remarkable opportunity to embrace COTA's rail plan as



**High Street - Center Running  
(Could be Curb Running)**

a catalyst for economic development, provide an alternative to traffic jams, and leave a positive legacy for generations in the future. If you're interested in knowing more about this opportunity, visit COTA's rail website at [www.cotafasttrax.com](http://www.cotafasttrax.com), see [www.1kco.org](http://www.1kco.org) for information on the next "Bacon, Eggs and Rail" breakfast, or let the Columbus Partnership know of your interest in light rail by e-mailing [feedback@columbuspartnership.com](mailto:feedback@columbuspartnership.com).



*Richard Sensenbrenner is a German Village resident and has been a Columbus City Councilman for 8 years. He is a CPA and works at Columbus College for Art and Design.*