

March 28, 2023

Joint Standing Committee on Transportation
100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333

Re: Support of LD 259, *An Act Making Unified Allocations from the Highway Fund*

Dear Sen. Chipman, Rep. Williams, and Committee members,

Please accept this letter as the testimony of the Greater Portland Council of Governments (GPCOG) in support of *An Act Making Unified Allocations from the Highway Fund*. Transportation funding is critical to our member municipalities and our entire region, and we welcome all that this budget seeks to accomplish.

GPCOG serves 25 municipal members in Cumberland County, from Sebago Lake to Casco Bay, as well as Saco, Biddeford, Arundel, and Old Orchard Beach through the Portland Area Comprehensive Transportation System (PACTS). We deliver transportation, land use, sustainability, and economic development services to our members and their communities.

As we support PACTS, we see firsthand how disruptive the pandemic has been for our public transportation providers. Although federal relief funding (CARES and ARPA) helped transit agencies “weather the storm” of the pandemic, ridership has not returned to pre-pandemic levels, which is particularly challenging for bus transit operators, who serve vulnerable populations dependent on bus service for work, wellness, and life’s necessities. The depressed ridership, coupled with rising costs, could signal the beginning of a fiscal cliff, which will disproportionately hurt vulnerable people and will also reduce our region’s future capacity to build well-located growth and development in tandem with robust transit services.

In their letter to you of March 6, 2023, the Maine Transit Association (MTA) outlined the persistent loss of ridership experienced by all our bus transit agencies, and the looming end of federal pandemic relief funding. Without expanded state funding for bus transit, agencies will be forced to reduce services at a time when we need them to do more than ever.

MTA has asked this Committee to increase funding to all bus transit agencies in Maine for operations and maintenance to \$6.78 million dollars in FY 24-25. We join MTA in urging you to do so in this budget, thereby assuring the continued operation of all bus transit services in our region, and in the state.

As a regional council, GPCOG works with our communities on many related challenges including economic development, climate action, and the housing crisis that continues to make all types of housing less and less affordable for far too many people.

From our perspective, we envision a more robust transit system that includes bus transit agencies providing two essential services. First, transit services must continue to provide critical mobility services which support all members of our community.

Second, they must enable and accompany new growth and development, including expanded housing following new state policies, all well-located in places that reduce congestion, climate impacts, and sprawl while still supporting new jobs, investment, and workforce growth.

For more information, please refer to our [Transit Together](https://www.transittogether.org) report (<https://www.transittogether.org>), as well as our long-range regional transportation plan [Connect 45](https://www.connect2045.org) (<https://www.connect2045.org>).

You can see in both documents the central role that transit will play in our region's future development, but only if its current capacities are sufficiently funded.

For all these reasons we support LD 259, and as you shape the transportation budget, we urge you to expand bus agencies' operational funding as outlined by the MTA so those agencies can continue to provide their vital service today, and in the future.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our views, and please let me know if I can provide anything more to support your work on LD 259, and more broadly, on transportation's central role in the future of our region's development.

Sincerely,



Kristina Egan
Executive Director
Greater Portland Council of Governments