

February 28, 2019

Dear Columbia City Council Members,

***“We exist to provide the best possible service to all.”*** Source: The 2019 Columbia Budget and the 2016-2019 City of Columbia Strategic Plan – the first core Value listed in both documents

***“All can get to work!”*** From the graphic on page 12 of the Strategic Plan. This well laid out diagram shows strategic connections with social equity in the middle, clearly demonstrating how Infrastructure is a necessary component to social equity and to all of Columbia’s Strategic Connections.

***“Infrastructure: Connecting the community – How can we build the future today?”*** from the 2016-2019 Strategic Priorities and Questions in the Strategic Plan

**Public transit is a primary component in the goals and success of Columbia, not a secondary one.**

The Columbia 2019 and 2020 budgets have dealt a severe blow to public transit directly impacting thousands of our citizens in their work, health, and family matters, in addition to severely curtailing any hoped-for progress to market Columbia as a progressive, accessible transportation community.

As expected in a growing, vibrant community such as Columbia, there have been changes since the current structure of the transportation sales tax distribution was implemented. When changes take place, healthy communities with goals and visions such as those Columbia outlines in both its Budget and Strategic Plan take hard looks at previously determined structures to determine if they continue to be fair and equitable.

The average daily ridership for Go COMO Fixed route system is estimated at 2,063, a sizable number. With that, and with the good and future of our community in mind, we, the Public Transit Advisory Commission, would like to bring up three important matters that, considered carefully and acted upon, could change the course of Columbia’s public transit system from the devastating cuts we now face:

1. The transportation sales tax generates about \$12 million per year. For a number of years the transportation sales tax has been divided as follows: 50% to the streets division, 25% to the airport, and 25% to transit. In 2016, Columbia voters approved a 1% increase of the lodging (hotel) tax, bringing the tax to 5%. This increase of 1% is specifically earmarked for the airport alone, and is estimated, by [news stories](#), to bring in approximately \$150,000 a quarter, enough money to keep a limited Saturday transit service funded for an entire year. Public transit gets no additional city funds. We should ask, “Does the 50%/25%/25% structure still fairly apply – in an equitable manner for *all* Columbia citizens?”
2. Councilperson Pitzer has raised the concern of the former city manager’s sales tax income projection being, as he stated in a letter February 2019 to his constituents, “far outside consensus.” While the former city manager projected a 2% decline in sales tax revenue, sales tax revenues for the first four months of 2019 have been flat. Given that budgets were created in

anticipation of a decline in sales tax revenue, the transit budget cuts overstate the decrease in funding available.

3. The transit department sets aside and projects an additional 20% of their entire budget annually, as do other departments, per the reserve fund policy. For the 2019 budget this amounts to \$1,451,969 for transit. When we consider public transit as a primary component rather than a secondary component for our citizens, we see the tangible ways this policy, as currently stands, leads in part to the transit division making the devastating cuts we see today. Council has discretionary use of 50% of these pooled funds from all departments. Given the direct impact transit's 20% contribution to this fund has on our citizens, the PTAC feels this is an area that warrants further discussion.

At the Pre-Council work session on Feb 18<sup>th</sup> Councilperson Skala brought up the idea of taking 2.5% of the portion of the transportation sales tax from roads and 2.5% of the portion from the airport to go to transit. He asked what that would mean for transit. Quick estimations by consenting Councilperson Thomas suggested an additional 5% for transit would mean ~\$600,000 a year. That combined with the federal funds matched for that amount and transit could see an increase of ~\$1.2 million dollars, or, at the very least, prevent the expected loss in federal funding that will result from the cuts.

Below are estimated costs to keep parts of transit:

**Limited Saturday Service, w/ 90 minute headways:** \$148,071.45

**Saturday Service, w/ 45 minute headways (like rest of week w/June changes):** \$176,136.71

**Cost to add a route/bus w/out Saturday Service:** \$120,607.46

**Cost to add a route/bus w/Saturday Service:** \$142,053.23

**Cost to add back the additional hour of service, Monday-Friday:** \$120,578.38

In January of 2018, the PTAC held an open forum for the business community. The goal was to bring in business representatives from the community to make them aware of PTAC and to learn about their employee transportation needs. A human resources manager from Kraft Foods attended the meeting. He said that just the day before they had had to fire one of their workers because this worker did not have transportation to get to and from the job.

Referring again to Columbia's Strategic Plan we see this quote as our vision statement, "*Columbia is the best place for everyone to live, work, learn and play*". Is the City of Columbia being consistent by cutting the annual transit budget by more than \$1 million dollars while at the same time emphasizing transit in its Strategic Plan and marketing? We must ask ourselves what are the goals of public funds, who should public funds should be assisting and what are the goals of transit in our community?

It may be useful to use the Airport as a 'model' for how to approach transit funding to insure a robust bus system. The airport struggled for many years to provide decent flight service into and out of Columbia. Its recent success has been the result of an increase in funding by the City of Columbia through various tax regimes plus the increase in daily flights available into and out of the airport. That is, the airport is successful because the City increased funding and increased service. It did not succeed by decreasing funding and service as is being done with the bus system. With this being the case, it seems reasonable that if the City of Columbia truly desires a robust transit system that serves our City, both funding and service should be increased.

We, the Public Transit Advisory Commission respectfully ask that you delve further into the three important matters outlined above and consider the significant impacts transit funding has on our community. Continued Saturday service is an immediate priority and we ask that you consider that at the forefront of your discussions.

Sincerely,

Katherine Lee – Outgoing Chair  
On behalf of the PTAC  
Public Transit Advisory Commission