

Re: Proposed FY 24 Budget

To: Mayor Buffalo and City Council,

Thank you for allowing us the opportunity to provide feedback on the Proposed FY 24 City Budget. In line with the Public Transit Advisory Commission's charge to "advise City staff and Council with regard to transit policy", we have some concerns about the current proposed budget in relation to transportation.

Our first priority in reviewing the proposed budget was to ensure that transit funding is sufficient to fully implement the class and compensation study that will result in increased pay for our transit operators. PTAC has been concerned about the issue of understaffing of Columbia's bus system for some time (see, for instance, [our letter to City Council from March of last year](#) and the [more recent letter from May of this year](#)); we continue to believe that current staffing levels are unsustainable, and that the best way to work toward improvement is to increase driver pay as quickly as possible. Until negotiations have begun with the labor union, we can't be certain that the 9% proposed is sufficient to fully cover increases in labor costs. We urge the City Council to push for additional funding if there's any doubt that driver pay will suffer in any way.

The Commission also has concerns over the mention (during the budget work session) of re-evaluating free fares in the middle of the next fiscal year. We intend to discuss further details and options prior to that re-evaluation, and provide feedback in later correspondence, but we ask City Council to evaluate additional funding during this budget process to prevent the need for fares over at least the entire course of the fiscal year. According to historical documentation provided by city staff, fare revenue over the last eight full years prior to the pandemic (FY 12 to FY 19) averaged only about \$300,000 annually for fixed routes and about \$175,000 annually for paratransit (while advertising alone accounted for \$180,000 in revenue during the same period). Given the overhead caused by fare collection, and the negative impact fares would have on ridership (which determines federal funding levels), the relatively small amount of revenue contributed from fares should be carefully evaluated before changes are made. Currently only \$14.9 million is appropriated of the \$17.2 million in total Transportation Sales Tax revenue (including the additional \$1.5 million from the Use Tax that's being fully appropriated to Streets & Engineering), so there appears to be opportunity to fully fund transit with increased appropriation.

Lastly, and certainly least, the Commission would like to request a small budget, primarily for outreach. This year we had a strong showing at Columbia's Earth Day Festival because the Commission "passed the hat" and covered the cost and materials to put together a booth. In the future, we would like to continue these conversations in the community at this festival and possibly other events in order to fulfill our duty to "serve as a sounding board for citizen transit, pedestrian and safety and access issues". We would humbly request a small Public Transit Advisory Commission budget of \$300.

We sincerely appreciate the City's prioritization of Public Transit in this year's budget, and urge the City Council to ensure that the prioritization is fully funded.

Sincerely,

Matt Wright, Chair
Public Transit Advisory Commission