

Re: City Budget Priorities

To: City Manager Seewood, Mayor Buffalo, and City Council

On behalf of the Public Transit Advisory Commission (PTAC), we write to share our priorities and recommendations as you begin deliberations on the City's upcoming budget. Public transit is a foundational service for Columbia residents — connecting neighbors to jobs, healthcare, education, and daily life — and we appreciate the Council's ongoing commitment to it. We offer the following five areas for your consideration.

### **1. Fund Tier 1 of the Comprehensive Transit Study**

In September 2025, the City completed a Comprehensive Transit Study for Go COMO — a thorough, community-driven process spanning nearly two years of public engagement, peer analysis, and service planning. PTAC strongly urges the Council to treat it as a living planning document rather than a report that sits on a shelf.

The study organizes service improvements into four implementation tiers. Tier 1 — the near-term phase — calls for extending service hours on all routes into the evening (weekdays until 10:25 p.m. and Saturdays beginning at 6:00 a.m.), as well as adding evening bus coverage. According to the study's cost analysis, Tier 1 represents an increase of approximately \$1.36 million in annual operating cost over the current baseline, a 19.9% increase in vehicle revenue hours. This is a meaningful but achievable step.

We recognize that several new Council members have joined since this study was completed, so we want to be explicit: this work was funded by the City, informed by thousands of community voices, and endorsed through a public process. We respectfully urge the Council to budget for Tier 1 implementation and to direct staff to develop a timeline for doing so.

### **2. Re-examine the Balance of Transportation Sales Tax Allocations**

Columbia's half-cent Transportation Sales Tax (TST) is a vital funding source for transit, streets, and the airport. As documented in the Comprehensive Transit Study, this tax "has traditionally been allocated with 50 percent toward transit, 25 percent towards streets, and 25 percent toward the airport," though the study notes these amounts are not set by statute and may vary from year to year.

Transit's share of the TST has eroded in recent years, dropping toward 20% or below in some budget cycles, as reflected in city budget documents. We ask the Council to review this allocation carefully and consider whether the current split reflects the community's transit priorities. Given the documented need for service improvements and the staffing and operational pressures Go COMO faces, a rebalancing of the TST toward transit would be a meaningful and targeted investment.

We ask that the budget documents clearly state the TST allocation percentages to each recipient department so that the public and this commission can track these figures year over year.

### **3. Service Levels and Fare Reinstatement**

PTAC is emphatic on this point: **fares should not be reinstated until Go COMO has restored at minimum its baseline service levels — specifically, 45-minute headways on all fixed routes — permanently and reliably.**

For context: Go COMO operated at 45-minute headways until August 2023, when driver shortages forced a reduction to 90-minute headways. This was a significant degradation of service. A bus arriving once every 90 minutes is not a system many residents can build their day around. This past summer, Go COMO launched an encouraging trial returning to 45-minute service on core routes, and we applaud that effort.

But a summer pilot is not the same as a permanently funded, staffed, and sustained service level. Riders — particularly those who depend on transit because they have no other option — need certainty. Asking them to pay a fare for a service that may revert to 90-minute headways is not a reasonable ask.

Looking further ahead, the Comprehensive Transit Study identifies even greater frequency improvements as part of its long-term vision. PTAC encourages the Council to treat Tier 1 service levels as the **minimum acceptable service standard**, and commit to a plan to reach Tier 2 service levels before any fare conversation begins in earnest.

#### **4. Budget for Fare Collection Hardware**

When Go COMO transitioned to fare-free service during the COVID-19 pandemic, the existing — and already aging — farebox hardware was removed from vehicles. Should the City ever choose to reinstate fares in the future, new hardware will need to be procured and installed before that can happen.

City staff in Public Works have already prepared cost estimates for this equipment and shared them with the City Manager for budgeting purposes. PTAC recommends the Council factor these costs and associated time it will take to procure and install this equipment into any plan to reinstate fares.

#### **5. Consider Parking Fees at Columbia Regional Airport**

Columbia Regional Airport (COU) currently offers free parking to all users. Meanwhile, the airport receives approximately 25–30% of the Transportation Sales Tax annually — a substantial subsidy. PTAC believes the time has come to examine whether free parking at a publicly subsidized airport represents the best use of those combined resources.

Airports of comparable size routinely charge for parking, and those revenues go toward operations, capital maintenance, and other expenses — reducing reliance on general tax subsidy. If COU generated even modest parking revenue, it would have a path toward greater operational self-sufficiency. This, in turn, could create room to shift a larger portion of the TST toward transit, where the documented need is significant.

We acknowledge this is a policy decision that involves multiple departments and stakeholder interests. But we believe it is a conversation worth having, and encourage the Council to ask city staff to prepare an analysis of what a parking fee structure at the airport could look like and what fiscal impact it might have on the TST allocation to transit.

Thank you for your consideration of these priorities. Taken together, they reflect a straightforward ask: fund what we've already studied, allocate resources fairly, invest in the infrastructure fare collection will require, and hold the line on service quality before asking riders to pay for it. We appreciate the Council's attention to public transit and look forward to seeing these items reflected in the upcoming budget.

Respectfully submitted,

Public Transit Advisory Commission

Matt Wright, Chair