

Transit advocates say state funding is stuck in neutral

House bill would boost Indiana spending by \$17.5 million

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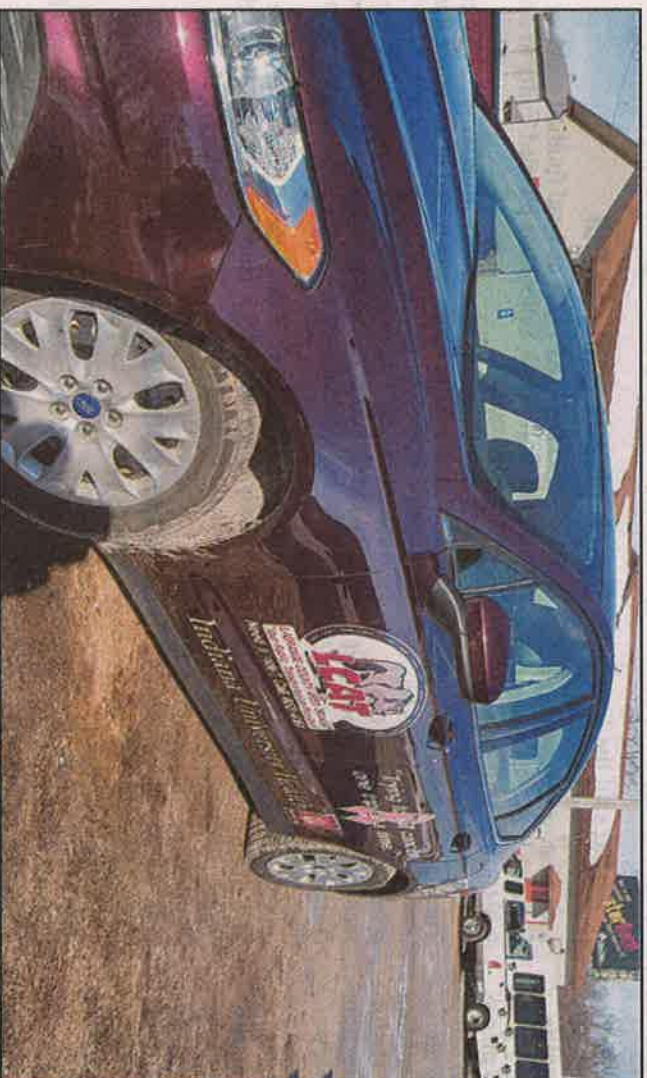
LAGRANGE — As the demand for transit services in the state grows, particularly in rural areas of northeast Indiana, proponents of public transportation are concerned that funding isn't keeping pace.

According to the Indiana Citizens' Alliance for Transit, an Indianapolis-based transit advocacy organization, public transportation ridership rose 15 percent across the state from 2004 to 2013. Yet state funding for transit has remained flat for the last seven years, the alliance said in a news release. In 2014 and 2015, it was \$42.6 million.

Indiana's 43 rural transportation agencies have indicated more funding for programs is needed, the alliance said. And a bill introduced in the General Assembly would provide just that.

House Bill 1215, co-authored by Rep. David Ober, R-Albion, would increase state funding of transit systems by \$17.5 million a year, to \$60 million. Gov. Mike Pence's proposed budget, however, suggests cutting transit funding by 3 percent in 2016 and 2017, according to the alliance.

In the news release, Kim



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A LaGrange County Area Transit vehicle sits outside the LaGrange County Council on Aging headquarters, waiting to make its next trip. LCAAT vehicles make more than 40,000 trips each year and cover nearly 500,000 miles.

Irwin, a member of the Indiana Citizens' Alliance for Transit, said increased funding for transit is vital to the state's overall economic health.

"Transit funding is critical for the economic livelihood of businesses, communities and individuals throughout Indiana," Irwin said. "It simply doesn't make sense to flat-line or reduce transit spending when the demand for

service in Indiana continues to increase."

For many people living in rural areas in northeast Indiana, transit agencies represent their only link to the outside world.

"The people that we transport are people that obviously have no other transportation," said Gregg Parker, director of the Noble County Council on Aging, which operates Steuben Takes A Ride.

Strawser said she plans on studying the issue and reserved comment.

STAR's 12 vehicles covered some 204,000 miles

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TRANSIT: Funding depends on revenue forecast

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in 2014.

Many of the people who use rural public transit services do so to make doctor's visits and other medically necessary appointments. A significant portion of ridership is individuals who are disabled and rely on public transportation agencies to provide wheelchair-accessible services that may not be available through private carriers.

Cheri Perkins, executive director of the LaGrange County Council on Aging and its LaGrange County Area Transit service, said more than half of the more than 40,000 trips her LCAT vans and cars take each year are to transport people

to see their doctors. Last year alone, LCAT vehicles traveled nearly 500,000 miles.

The transit services in LaGrange and Noble counties also carry individuals who are just looking to get from Point A to Point B.

"We also take a number of other people," Parker said. "We take some kids to school, for example. We take some people to work that don't drive. I don't know what they'd do if we weren't around to take them."

Transit systems like those in LaGrange and Noble counties rely on ride fares and a combination of local, state and federal funding.

Ober said the additional funding in HB 1215 would

have a greater effect on public transportation systems in larger cities like Fort Wayne that are struggling to provide services while at the same time keeping fares low.

He said the question of how much funding to provide for public transit will be worked out once the state gets its next revenue forecast.

"We're early in the budget talks," Ober said. "(Pence) has his version of the budget, the House will have our version and

the Senate will have their version, and then at the end of the last month or so of session, we'll put everything together and figure out what we can afford after we get the April forecast."