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Let's capitalize on a positive trend

Time to boost Indiana's transit spending

Most people would agree it's a good idea to invest in something that's trending upward. The state of Indiana has often followed this wisdom. For example, as we realized the increasing need for reliable broadband access, the state put money into broadband mapping. When advanced manufacturing showed potential, the state directed resources toward training programs targeting that industry.

However, in recent years, even though demand for transit increased, the state flatlined transit spending.

It's time to correct this. The General Assembly needs to increase state transit funding from the current \$42.5 million – the same funding level for each of the last seven years – to \$60 million so we can accommodate demand and seize the opportunities that better transit can bring. A bi-partisan proposal is aimed at doing just that. Rep. Randy Truitt, R-Lafayette, has introduced a bill (HB 1215) that's co-authored by Reps. Ed Soliday, R-Valparaiso, David Ober, R-Albion, and David Niezgodski, D-South Bend.

Statewide transit interest has grown steadily. Across Indiana, thousands of citizens have turned out for public hearings to discuss the need for improved and enhanced transit, from the fixed-route services in urban areas to the rural on-demand services that provide so many seniors, people with disabilities and others with transportation to medical appointments and other essentials. They show up for annual Transit Day activities at the Statehouse (to be held this year on March



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10), they contact their elected officials to ask for better services, and they sign petitions.

But the evidence of increasing interest is more than just anecdotal.

In Indiana, combined transit ridership was up 15 percent from 2004 to 2013, according to INDOT's Indiana Public Transit Annual Report. Agencies with increased ridership include CityBus in Lafayette (up 15 percent), IndyGo (up 24 percent), Union County Transit (up 48 percent), Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission (up 60 percent) and LaGrange County Area Transit (up 198 percent).

These increases align with a national trend. A recent study by the American Public Transportation Association found that in 2013 Americans took 10.7 billion trips on transit, the highest total since the 1950s, when the nation shifted to a car-centric culture and the highway building boom took off.

And this isn't a new phenomenon. Since 1995, U.S. public transit use has increased 372 percent, which outpaces the nation's population increase (20.3 percent) and higher than the increase in vehicle miles traveled (22.7 percent).

A number of factors are seen as contributing to such increases, including the overall aging of the population

(seniors who can't or don't want to drive rely on transit to keep them from becoming housebound), the decreasing use of cars by Millennials (between 2001 and 2009, that generation reduced its vehicle trips by 15 percent), concerns about the environment, the desire to use commuting time for reading, relaxing or physical activity, and more.

And it isn't just about demand for a ride; it's about access to jobs and economic opportunity. Sixty percent of Hoosiers who ride transit use it to get to work or school.

Transit also contributes directly to the Indiana economy. More than 3,500 Hoosiers are employed by transit operations, and thousands more work for the 60 transit manufacturers and suppliers with Indiana operations.

The argument for a greater investment in transit is inevitably pitted against the need for ongoing investment in the development and maintenance of roads and highways. Both are important, but what's often ignored is the way increased availability of transit leads to decreased wear and tear on roads. In Indiana, households near public transit drive an average of 4,400 fewer miles per year than other households. More transit means roads last longer and are more readily available for freight travel.

Despite all of this, Indiana's transit investment has remained stagnant. Please let your elected officials know it's time to increase Indiana's investment in transit.

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