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TRANSPORTATION

THE FUTURE OF TRANSIT

Voters will decide an issue in November that could change how Central Ohio residents get around the growing region.

This LinkUs rendering shows how bus rapid transit could operate on West Broad Street near COSI.

LINKUS



By [Amanda Tonoli](#) – Staff reporter , Columbus Business First
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The idea is simple enough: Streamline how people get around Central Ohio with easier and more equitable access to rapid transit to keep up with expanding workforce needs

Columbus LinkUs plan would change how Central Ohio residents get around the growing region - Columbus Business First through 2050.

Think light rail, but with slick, new buses instead of trains moving people through the region's busiest corridors.

Getting there, however, will be a long, expensive road, with voters ultimately deciding in November whether to fully fund it.

LinkUs, which was unveiled in 2020, calls for constructing rapid transit corridors; creating a new regional funding source for sidewalks, bike infrastructure, greenways and other related roadway upgrades; and boosting the Central Ohio Transit Authority through increased service hours, new routes, additional shelters and new facilities.



Bus rapid transit stops would operate more like train stations than traditional bus stops.

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The \$8 billion plan was created by COTA, the city of Columbus, Franklin County and the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission, with the backing of area business leaders and transit advocates.

Funding the work relies on Franklin County voters approving a tax increase on the November ballot, boosting COTA's portion of the local sales tax from 0.5% to 1%. Because COTA's service area extends to portions of Union, Delaware, Licking and Fairfield counties, voters there would also be asked to approve an increase.

Officials backing the project say they can make the case for improved mobility with one point: jobs.

"One of the things that we have always heard (from businesses) is how can we increase our workforce and how can we connect our employees with their jobs?" said Parag Agrawal, MORPC's chief mobility and infrastructure officer and senior director of programming.

"The word is reliable transportation," he said. "In talking about workforce, it's basically creating connections (and) connectivity between where the jobs are and where the

Columbus LinkUs plan would change how Central Ohio residents get around the growing region - Columbus Business First people live.

“That is the key.”

What is LinkUS?

Last year, COTA provided 11.1 million fixed-route passenger trips, a 12% increase from 2022.

That figure is expected to continue to grow as the region adds population on the way to having more than 3 million residents by 2050.

“What would that look like? It means more people (and) more cars on the road,” said Columbus City Council President Shannon Hardin, a key member of the LinkUs team. “It means everyone’s commute times would increase. It means that we’d have more pollution coming from our community.”

Hardin and other backers say the plan accommodates growth by providing enhanced transit to current and future job centers along key corridors.

“LinkUs is our community’s comprehensive plan to manage that growth and make sure that we’re not just getting bigger, but that we’re getting better as well,” Hardin said.



Image: Columbus Business First

Columbus City Council President Shannon Hardin is a major backer of LinkUs and increased transit options for the region. He's shown at COTA's Near East Transit Center on East Main Street.

JEFFRY KONCZAL

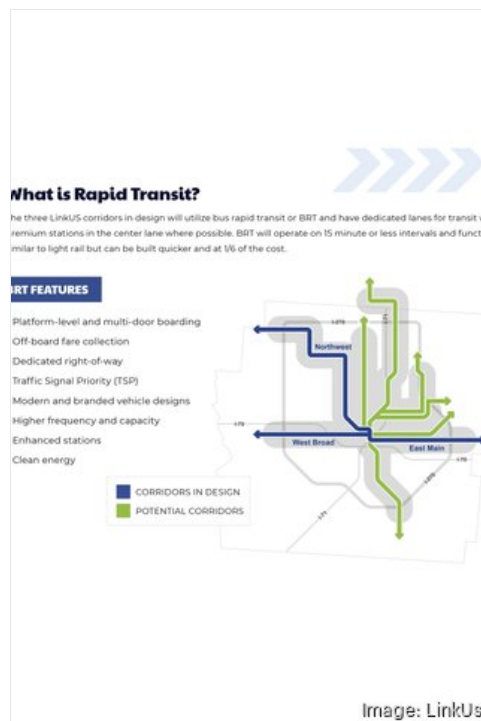
The goal is to boost COTA’s service hours by 45% by 2050, serving the increased population through extended hours, more frequency and new routes through Franklin County and portions of Union, Delaware, Licking and Fairfield counties.

The plan calls for high-capacity bus rapid transit, improved intersections and additional fixed routes, micro-transit options, and improved sidewalks and bikeways.

COTA estimates by 2030, the region will have three high-capacity rapid-transit corridors, with more to come by 2050.

The initial preferred corridors are:

- West Broad, a 9.3-mile route with dedicated bus lanes covering the majority of the corridor going from downtown to the Prairie Township Community Center. Utility work and localized construction would begin in 2025, and station and roadway construction would follow in 2026.
- East Main, a 13.6-mile route with dedicated bus guideways covering the majority of the corridor going from downtown to a new development east of Taylor Road in Reynoldsburg. Utility and localized construction would begin in 2026, with station and roadway construction following in 2027.
- Northwest, extending from downtown along Spring and Long streets and Olentangy River Road, ending at Bethel Road. Initial utility construction would begin in 2027.



LinkUs planners have designated three corridors for the beginning phase of the initiative. Other potential routes are in green.

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LinkUs officials say the first three corridors could provide easier access to more than 380,000 jobs.

“What this is about isn’t just bus rapid transit,” said Sandy Doyle-Ahern, president of civil engineering firm EMH&T and chair of the LinkUs workforce stakeholder group. “It’s really about not only creating corridors where we will have rapid transit but also connecting pedestrian pathways that don’t connect currently.

“And if you look at a map of Franklin County, there actually are some really nice resources around the community for bike paths in particular,” she said. “But if you really look at where those lines are drawn, they don’t connect. So part of what this would be about then is connecting all of that pathway opportunity to these other mobility hubs.”

And Doyle-Ahern said time is of the essence.

“If we don’t put some infrastructure in place now while we have a community that is eager for it and willing to make room for it, it’s just going to get harder and harder as the region grows out to go back later and add that infrastructure, making it more expensive and more difficult,” she said.

“The time is now.”

What would LinkUs cost?

Last year, COTA’s board approved a \$1.2 billion, five-year plan that includes \$723.4 million for the continued design and construction of the three corridors and \$296.4 million to pay for additional construction.

That includes new bus rapid-transit stations, customer amenities, roadway improvements and alterations, right-of-way acquisition, traffic signal upgrades, sidewalk and bicycle connections, micro-mobility hubs, new buses and various other elements as part of the project.

In all, the funding plan calls for generating new revenue of nearly \$2 billion by 2030 and more than \$8 billion by 2050.



Hardin said the time is right to ask voters to approve the plan.

“We believe this is our shot as a community to really build our future,” he said. “What we have seen in conversations with transit activists, from business leaders, from neighborhood leaders, is that the time is now.

“We feel the energy,” he said. “... We think that this is a good year to go to the voters and have this conversation.”

Visualizing the future

What happens along the planned corridors is also a “significant development opportunity,” Doyle-Ahern said. Additional housing, schools, childcare centers, healthcare centers, offices, retail and restaurants will follow the new routes, LinkUs backers say.

“If you build it, they will come,” said Patrick Harris, a COTA spokesman.

Harris pointed to Cleveland’s experience after installing dedicated dedicated transit lanes. He said that city’s \$200 million project resulted in 8,800 new residential units and a \$9.5 billion economic benefit.

“I can only imagine the economic benefit to our region would be at least that, if not considerably more,” he said.

The LinkUs plan going before voters in November calls for setting aside 27.5% of sales tax proceeds - a projected \$60 million a year - toward transit-supportive infrastructure to build out and improve more than 500 miles of sidewalks, bike paths, greenways and more.

That’s the cost of becoming a world-class city, Doyle-Ahern said.

“You’ve got to be a city that has a lot of transportation opportunities,” she said. “What we’re really talking about is making an investment ... to leverage federal dollars to allow us to grow a mobility option.”

But first, leaders must convince voters that this investment is worth the sales tax increase.

“If we don’t do this, there are examples of communities that did not plan for growth and grew anyways,” Hardin said. “Will we have the infrastructure to make sure that it’s good for everybody? I think of places that saw growth coming but did not build out for it or plan for it, and they now have plenty of people that come in for work but drive out - nobody stays because they can’t.

“You have long-term rent residents that are unable to live in communities that they have known for decades,” he said, “and new folks coming in, unable to establish roots because the cost of living is too high.”



This rendering shows off what a LinkUs bus rapid transit route would look like

LINKUS