

Public Transit and Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) Questions and Answers

Q1. Why is NOACA trying to assist the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) to get funding for local public transit agencies?

A. NOACA's main goal is to do what we can to help the people who depend on transit for jobs, medical care and other necessities. Additionally, we want to maintain the air quality improvements achieved by transit. Working with the transit agencies to provide these vital transit services helps us all.

The transit funding crisis we're experiencing is happening all over the country. The problem is worse in Ohio for several reasons. For example, the Ohio Constitution prohibits using state gas tax funds for transit. Ohio ranks 12th in the nation in terms of transit ridership but 42nd in state transit funding. State funding for transit in Ohio has dropped 63 percent since 2001.

Q2. What is CMAQ?

A. Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) is a federal highway funding program designed to reduce traffic congestion and improve air quality. It can be used for bus replacements, air quality programs, bike paths, traffic signal improvements and other projects that will reduce "vehicle miles traveled" or conserve fuel. Public transit meets these goals.

ODOT receives CMAQ funds from the federal government. The amount received is proportional to the severity of pollution and the population exposed to it in the state's various nonattainment areas. However, ODOT is not required to suballocate CMAQ funds to the region. It does so because it believes NOACA is better able to judge the needs and merits of proposed CMAQ projects in its area. In return, NOACA provides an annual report of its CMAQ uses within the region to ODOT as part of its cooperative agreement with ODOT. By law and regulation, CMAQ is mostly used for capital improvements.

Q3. How much money might become available to the region's public transit agencies?

A. At its September meeting, the NOACA Governing Board will consider the recommendations that have come from the Transportation Advisory Committee, Regional Transportation Investment Subcommittee, and Transit Council. The agencies that are eligible to receive these emergency funds are the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority (GCRTA), Laketran, Lorain County Transit (LCT), Brunswick Transit Alternative (BTA), Geauga County Transit (GCT), and Medina County Public Transit (MCPT).

Transit Council funding recommendations as of August 21, 2008 are:

GCRTA	\$9,031,793
Laketran	\$1,000,000
LCT	\$ 645,431
BTA	\$ 38,103
GCT	\$ 136,643
MCPT	\$ 305,174

Total \$11,157,144

Q4. When might this funding be available to transit agencies?

A. Since CMAQ has limited flexibility, the CMAQ funds returned to ODOT by NOACA may be replaced by other funds, which can then be used more easily by transit agencies. (The TAC has recommended that limiting the use of CMAQ funds to capital improvements be reviewed by federal agencies.)

If the NOACA Governing Board approves the funding measure, the next step is for ODOT to determine how to process the funds to the transit agencies. At this time we do not know how long this will take.

Q5. Will other projects be affected by this transfer?

A. We do not expect any projects on the region's Transportation Improvement Program to be affected by this transfer. The source of the proposed funding is currently uncommitted CMAQ funds. Only uncommitted funds will be used for this purpose.

Q6. Do you have other funding sources that could be used for this?

A. Not currently. Other sources of NOACA funding are already committed to planned projects.

Q7. How long will this funding last before transit agencies have to cut service or raise fares?

A. We don't know. The problem is complex, and we cannot speak to each scenario in detail. We want to provide help to the transit-riding public and transit agencies so that all of us can work together to develop long-term solutions for the problem of chronic underfunding for public transit. GCRTA General Manager Joe Calabrese has said that the recommended funding amount will enable GCRTA to operate with a small fuel surcharge and minimal adjustments to transit service until the end of 2009. After that time if there is not a new source of guaranteed operating revenue from the Ohio General Assembly or the United States Congress, GCRTA will be forced to make recommendations for another higher fuel surcharge and substantial reductions in service.

Q8. What happens if diesel fuel prices fall?

A. The real problem is that public transit has been chronically underfunded, especially in Ohio. The recent spike in fuel prices has turned a chronic problem into a crisis, and has brought national attention to the issue of transit funding. If fuel prices fall, the best we could expect is that service cuts would be delayed into the future. This funding crisis isn't going to go away with lower diesel prices.

For this reason, we view NOACA's proposed action as a temporary measure that can give the state and federal legislatures time to act. We intend to press our case for additional transit funding in both Columbus and Washington, D.C.