

Blue Ribbon Commission Meeting Minutes

Date: April 8, 2025

Time: 10:00 a.m.

Location: Erie County Office Building Chambers, 247 Columbus Avenue, Sandusky

Welcoming Remarks – Co-Chairman Jeff Krabill

The meeting was called to order by Co-Chairman **Jeff Krabill**. Roll Call was taken, with all members being present. An attendance sheet was signed by audience members present.

Approval of Minutes from April 1, 2025 – Topic of Discussion: Infrastructure

A motion to approve the minutes that were distributed electronically was made by Mr. Forster and seconded by Ms. Crescimano. The motion carried unanimously.

Purpose of the Meeting

Mr. Jeff Krabill (Blue Ribbon Commission) welcomed attendees and introduced the primary focus of the meeting: exploring opportunities for collaboration among public entities to improve **cost efficiency and accessibility** of public transportation across Erie County.

He introduced **Mr. James Stacey, City of Sandusky Transit Administrator**, and **Ms. Colleen Gilson, Director of Community Development**, who would share updates and data on the Sandusky Transit System (STS) — currently the only public transportation provider in Erie County.

Review

- Possible centralized hub in Sandusky to service more expansive area outside of city limit
 - Existing
- What is the appetite for expanded services county wide from other municipalities
 - Smaller townships and villages are unfamiliar with STS. Need to do more outreach in those areas to promote STS and Dial-a-Ride.
- Current customer base:
 - Diverse customer base (including veterans and seniors) ranging from locals traveling to work, for leisure, and doctors' appointments. Out of town individuals also utilizing STS for leisure.
- Current Revenue sources:
 - FTA Federal Loans, City Funds, Contract Revenue, State Assistance, and Farebox

- Current scheduling and operations:
 - Dial-a-Ride – Monday through Saturday, 6am-10pm, anywhere in Erie County - \$5.00 per trip
 - Fixed Route – 6-7 days a week, 6am-10:30pm, 5 Routes/Sandusky and Perkins, 1 Bus per hour, \$2.00 per trip
 - Paratransit – Monday through Sunday, 6am – 10:30pm, trips must be scheduled, \$3.00 per trip
- What private sources are available:
 - Current contracts with Cedar Point, MBS, Erie County Job and Family Services, Erie County Board of Developmental Disabilities, Erie County Veterans Service Commission and Serving Our Seniors.
 - These contracts do not cover the cost of operations
 - Need more funding sources to make STS sustainable on its own
- How to better site bus stops/facilities:
 - Bus Shelters cost approximately \$14,000-\$15,000 per shelter
 - Currently have six bus shelters in place, with the goal to have a total of 18 by the end of the year
 - Bus shelters can be wrapped with advertising, which would make more visible and bring in revenue stream
 - Currently having issues with getting in contact with right people (mall). The Mall is not interested in having a bus shelter erected in the Best Buy grassy area. This is a heavily traveled route, with approximately 9,000 individuals using the transit to that bus site per month.
- Activities planned or in progress to improve efficiency
 - Increased the fixed route fare, reduced the hours of operations, redesigned the fixed routes, and re-evaluated the fuel sources of the buses, no longer using diesel-fueled vehicles.
 - By increasing the fare by \$.50, earned \$65,000 more in revenue
 - 2023 HDR Study provided SWOT analysis and review of STS transit vs. comparable transit systems in the state.
 - Advertising
 - Small source of revenue (\$35,000) for advertising
 - Possible billboards
 - Wrap the busses or shelters with business advertisements
 - Digital screen located in the busses or hang business material in the busses
 - Google Maps and Transit App assist with efficiency when scheduling rides

Ms. Colleen Gilson (City of Sandusky Director of Community Development) commended Mr. Stacey on being able to reduce the local burden carried by the City of Sandusky's General Fund from \$1.3 million to \$600,000 in a matter of a few years.

Public Comment

Ms. Sue Daughtery (Executive Director, Serving Our Seniors) emphasized the urgency of addressing the transportation needs of older, disadvantaged citizens—particularly those living outside of the Sandusky city limits. She expressed worry that as these populations age, their ability to live independently becomes increasingly reliant on access to consistent, affordable public transit. Without adequate transportation, many seniors risk becoming isolated and dependent. Ms. Daughtery voiced concern that without sustainable funding, the city may be forced to discontinue public transportation services altogether within the next five years. If that were to happen, older adults would be disproportionately impacted. She urged the Commission and other public officials to take proactive steps toward creating a system that serves all of Erie County equitably and sustainably.

Mr. John Orzech (City Manager, City of Sandusky) praised Mr. Stacey for his leadership in improving STS operations and reducing the city's financial burden. Mr. Orzech noted that the City has formed a dedicated team to explore strategies for sustaining the transit system. Mr. Orzech and the City of Sandusky would fully support a county-ran transit system. He observed that ridership from outside the city limits has increased, stating the need for additional funding partnerships. Mr. Orzech acknowledged the current system is not sustainable if funding and operational responsibility remain solely with Sandusky.

Ms. Mindy Birkholz (Mobility Management Advocate, Great Lakes Community Action Partnership) helps coordinate transportation services for individuals in the nine counties that GLCAP services. She indicated that Huron County has a county-funded transit system that is successful, and provides regionally supported transportation services. Ms. Birkholz noted that a City of Huron resident currently uses Huron County transportation services instead of STS simply due to lack of awareness. She highlighted that without a unified approach and public education, valuable resources like STS may go underutilized.

Mr. Jeff Krabill (Co-Chair, Blue Ribbon Commission) acknowledged the success of STS improvements but raised a critical question: is it solely the City of Sandusky's responsibility to extend transit services into rural and township areas? He challenged the room to consider whether the expansion of service should fall to a broader coalition of public entities, especially given that STS is the only public transportation system in the county.

Mr. Steve Shoffner (Erie County Commissioner) provided an overview of potential funding through a dedicated sales tax levy for the creation of a Regional Transportation Authority (RTA). He cited that a 1% sales tax in Erie County last year generated \$22 million in revenue. Even a tenth-of-a-percent increase could provide meaningful funding if voters approved it. However, he clarified that the Board of Commissioners is not interested in using General Fund dollars to sustain STS operations, though they may consider capital funding support. Mr. Shoffner also mentioned a data-gathering system through Placer AI, which collects cell phone data and provides a picture of who, when, and where citizens visit the area. Not just tourists are coming to the area. Citizens from Clyde, Norwalk, and Oak Harbor are also visiting and spending money in Erie County. This option may be a tool assist collecting the data needed to see the impact on what the transit system is doing for the community.

Ms. Diane Corso (Erie County Board of Developmental Disabilities) supported the concept of countywide transit, noting that a Regional Transit Authority (RTA) could address the gaps currently faced by residents served by her agency. She stressed that for an RTA to function effectively, cross-entity cooperation and financial contributions would be essential. Ms. Corso raised a follow-up question on behalf of Ms. Daughtery (who had to leave the meeting early): “What would it take for the Blue Ribbon Commission to consider a countywide sales tax to fund public transportation?” Mr. Krabill responded that the Blue Ribbon’s role is to explore cost reductions and efficiencies—not to propose new taxes. Mr. Parker reinforced this point, stating the Commission’s directive is to identify ways to reduce, not increase, tax burdens. Nonetheless, both acknowledged the importance of the topic and commended Serving Our Seniors for bringing it to public attention.

Ms. Nicole Spriggs (Community Member) added a generational perspective, noting that her adult children reside in cities with strong, accessible public transit systems. She stressed that to attract and retain younger residents, Erie County must become a community that values walkability and access to public transportation. She argued that these factors are not just conveniences—they are essential for economic development, livability, and future growth.

Mr. James Stacey (Transit Administrator, STS) posed a procedural question: what steps are required to get an RTA on the ballot?

Mr. Tom Tucker (Blue Ribbon Commission) responded that per Ohio Revised Code, the process begins with local support. Each County Commissioner, township, and village must pass a resolution in support of the RTA. Mr. Krabill added that public hearings must be held to gather input, and a formal plan must be developed detailing governance, board membership, oversight, and administration. Only then, can a ballot issue be filed with the Board of Elections.

Mr. Orzech mentioned an example of a financial limitation of the Transit System. He explained that one agency, despite significantly benefiting from STS, contributed only \$71,000 while the actual service cost to the City was \$170,000. The City has solicited funds from other local governments, with little success, collecting between 10,000 and \$20,000. Seniors and people with disabilities, who account for 60% of Erie County’s population, are the most dependent on STS, and any disruption in service would deeply affect them.

Mr. Tom Forster (Blue Ribbon Commission) inquired whether STS receives support from corporate partners. Mr. Stacey confirmed that Cedar Point and Serving Our Seniors are the two largest contributors, each providing \$200,000 annually.

There being no further questions, Mr. Krabill expressed gratitude to all speakers and participants, stating this was one of the most engaging and constructive discussions the Commission has had. He stated if anyone has any further comments that would be beneficial to Blue Ribbon Commission process, feel free to reach out to us through our email.

Meeting Summary

Mr. Parker provided a summary of key points from today's meeting:

- STS requires a sustainable funding mechanism; Sandusky alone cannot continue to carry the cost.
- Need for additional private and public partners must be discussed
- Cooperation needed from landowners for bus sites
- Outreach is essential to inform residents of available services like Dial-a-Ride.
- Entities benefiting from STS services should contribute financially.

Adjournment

Next Meeting: Scheduled for Tuesday, April 15, 2025 at McCormick Middle School
325 Ohio Street, Huron at 10:00 a.m.

Topic Discussion: **Education**

Facilitators: Mr. Tucker and Mr. Krabill

A motion to adjourn was made by Mr. Forster and seconded by Mrs. Crescimano. The motion carried unanimously.