

Free COTA bus passes could help ease downtown office vacancies and low-wage employee turnover, advocates say - Columbus - Columbus Business First

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If just 6 percent of downtown workers ditch their cars for a proposed free bus pass, commuting patterns indicate that could free enough parking spots to attract new employers who'd bring downtown offices near full occupancy.

Nearly two-thirds of downtown property owners voted in favor of paying 3 cents per square foot of retail and office space toward buying discounted bus passes in bulk for the estimated 43,000 private-sector employees in the Capital Crossroads Special Improvement District starting in July 2018.

The Central Ohio Transportation Authority has yet to approve the program.

If 2,580 of the pool give up parking, the district could accommodate nearly 3,000 new workers, according to Capital Crossroads. It would take more than 5,000 workers to get to 95 percent office occupancy.

"We only need a very small shift to have a pretty big impact downtown," said [Cleve Ricksecker](#), executive director of the Capital Crossroads and Discovery SIDs. "We think this program, if it's approved, will serve as a national model."

(Yesterday [the proposal got a shout-out](#) from *Slate*, which didn't note that it's not yet a done deal.)

Nearly one-fourth of office space in the district is vacant, with 1.7 million square feet available, according to Xceligent data as of August.

In two years, OhioHealth Corp. will vacate an additional 140,000 square feet in two East Broad Street towers when it moves to a new corporate headquarters near Clintonville. Meanwhile, retail, hotel and restaurant employers complain of high employee turnover in the district because of the "huge financial stress" of commuting on low wages, Ricksecker told me.

"Downtown is hot. The one disadvantage of downtown is parking," said an email from Skip Weiler, president of developer Robert Weiler Co. "It is expensive and difficult. It will only get worse. Free [COTA](#) would be a major step in solving that issue."

Employers interested in downtown often call the Special Improvement District and ask where they can find dedicated blocs of employee parking. There are no easy answers.

"For buildings that don't have their own dedicated parking, it's a real problem," Ricksecker said. "Somebody vacates a building and the brokers can't re-lease the space."

Parking garages are too expensive to build, and likely will become obsolete in the next 15 years as self-driving cars and other advances finally change commuting habits, Ricksecker said.

"The only thing you can do (in the meantime) is incentivize transit," he said.

The proposal can help alleviate the parking shortage while lowering parking costs for workers or employers who provide paid parking, Matt Gregory, senior vice president of NAI Ohio Equities, said in an email. Not

everyone would use the pass, he said, such as those who need to drive to frequent appointments.

New tenants might be more likely to adopt free passes than existing employers where commuting habits are more set, the property owners and Ricksecker said.

Employers happy after kicking the tires

Four employers in the district test-drove the program for the past two years: [Bricker & Eckler LLP](#), Porter Wright Morris & Arthur LLP, [State Auto Financial Corp.](#) and [Huntington Bancshares Inc.](#)

In the first three months, about 70 of the combined 844 employees shifted from driving to taking the bus. Data collected from the swiped passes showed boarding throughout Franklin County, as far as the New Albany park-and-ride lot.

Even though State Auto provides free parking, employee Spencer Trafford started taking the No. 2 bus along High Street from Clintonville daily.

“I often used the free bus pass to go out on the weekends (Short North, downtown, Blue Jackets Games, etc.),” Trafford, a claims and risk engineering associate, said via email.

Both law firms welcome expansion of the program.

The passes can help existing employees struggling to find available or affordable parking, said Angie Geist, Bricker’s chief human resources officer.

“It also serves as a valuable incentive as we recruit young attorneys and staff who are eager to adopt ‘carless’ transportation options,” she said in an email. “The response from our team members during the pilot program was very enthusiastic.”

Two percent of Porter Wright’s employees stopped buying parking passes entirely, but 40 percent of the firm took passes to supplement their commute, said Betsy Duffy, benefits administrator, via email. “Administration of the program was painless,” she said.

What has to happen next

The program largely would be confined within the Special Improvement District boundaries, a narrow north-south column encompassing Capitol Square. Federal and state employees would be excluded.

Public and private employers near the district are considering buying in by paying the cost of passes, including the city of Columbus, Franklin County and [Nationwide Mutual Insurance Co.](#), which has expanded its office space into the Arena District.

[COTA](#) spokesman Marty Stutz said the transit agency is waiting for Capital Crossroads to raise grants and direct employer contributions to fund the full \$1.75 million annual cost before preparing a resolution.

City Council approved the three-year special property assessment, which raises about \$420,000 annually when collections start Jan. 1; it does not apply to residential or parking square footage.

“They have a lot of funding to secure,” Stutz said.

The passes would be greatly discounted: \$40.50 a year, compared with \$730 to buy 31-day passes. But it’s a guaranteed purchase for the entire population, regardless of how many use it.

“It’s like an insurance policy,” Ricksecker said.

The program and price are modeled after Ohio State University’s deal with [COTA](#) to buy bulk passes for the Columbus student body so student IDs can be swiped the same as a fare card.

“From what we know, that price seems reasonable to us,” Stutz said. “Hopefully, we would have more riders under this scenario.”

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