

North Corridor Light Rail Transit Project

Scoping Information Packet



Federal Transit Administration

Central Ohio Transit Authority

July 2003



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SUMMARY OF SCOPING INFORMATION

Project Contact Information:

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Project website: www.cotafasttrax.com

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Toll-free Project Telephone Line: 866-RAIL-COTA (866-724-5268)

Public Scoping Meeting Dates and Locations:

- **Tuesday, July 22, 2003** at Rhodes Office Tower, Lobby Hearing Room, 30 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH, from 8:00 to 10:00 AM. Presentation at 8:30 AM.
- **Tuesday, July 22, 2003** at St. Stephen's Community House, 1500 17th Avenue, Columbus, OH, from 6:00 to 8:00 PM. Presentation at 6:30 PM.
- **Wednesday, July 23, 2003** at North Broadway United Methodist Church, 48 East North Broadway, Columbus, OH, from 6:00 to 8:00 PM. Presentation at 6:30 PM.

Interagency Scoping Meeting Date and Location:

- **Thursday, July 24, 2003** at COTA Rail Development Office, Main Conference Room, 3rd Floor, 1650 Lake Shore Drive, Columbus, OH, from 10:00 AM to 12:00 PM.

Special Assistance Needs: The locations of the scoping meetings are accessible to persons with disabilities. Any individual with a disability who requires special assistance to participate in the scoping meetings should contact Mr. Michael L. Bradley at the address or telephone number shown above, use COTA TDD: 614-228-1832 (available 8:30 AM – 5:30 PM Mon-Fri), or send an email to info@cotafasttrax.com. The request must be received by **July 14, 2003** in order for COTA to make necessary arrangements.

Submission of Written Comments: Written comments will be accepted throughout the scoping comment period, which ends **August 15, 2003**. Any comments received after August 15, 2003 will be considered during the project planning period, but may not be included in the Scoping Process Report. Written comments should be submitted to the project contact addresses shown above.

I. Introduction

The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and the Central Ohio Transit Authority (COTA) have issued notice to interested agencies and the public that, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, as amended, an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is being prepared for the proposed transportation improvements in the North Corridor and adjacent areas in the City of Columbus, Franklin and Delaware Counties within the metropolitan area of Columbus, Ohio.

The EIS will evaluate the following alternatives: a no-action alternative; a transportation system management (TSM) alternative; and build alternatives consisting of light rail transit in one of several alignment options combined with increased bus service in the North Corridor. Scoping will be accomplished through meetings and correspondence with interested persons and organizations, the general public, and federal, state and local agencies.

The EIS will address the need to improve mobility and reverse commute access in the corridor, reduce adverse environmental impacts in the region, provide long-term, cost effective transportation infrastructure and services, and enhance regional economic development.

II. History and Background

Over the past 20 years, the Columbus metropolitan area has experienced substantial population and economic growth. Approximately 1.5 million people call the Columbus metropolitan area home. In fact, with the 2000 Census, the City of Columbus moved up to the position of being the 15th largest city in the United States. Central Ohio is predicted to grow by nearly 400,000 people over the next 20 years. Along with the region's population and economic growth, traffic has increased substantially in the Columbus metropolitan area. In the *2000 City of Columbus Citizen Satisfaction Survey*, traffic congestion was the number one issue of concern. By 2025, the central Ohio region expects a nearly four-fold increase in traffic.

COTA and the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC) have been working together for nearly two decades to address the transportation problems and needs in the Columbus metropolitan area. In 1984, COTA and MORPC completed an Alternative Analysis for the North Corridor of the service area (*North Corridor Transit Solutions for the Future*).

In 1991, COTA and MORPC initiated an update of the long range plan for public transportation in the region. The plan update, entitled *Long Range System Plan Analysis*, was completed in 1993 and recommended a series of transit system improvements, including the development of eight fixed guideway transit lines using existing freight rail corridors. As a result of the plan update, the 15-mile North Corridor between the Polaris area and Downtown Columbus generally along Interstate 71 was identified as the priority corridor for fixed guideway transit improvements and was recommended for further study of rail transit.

Following upon the recommendation of the *Long Range System Plan Analysis*, COTA and MORPC sought and received FTA approval to prepare an analysis of alternatives in

the North Corridor. A Major Investment Study (MIS) for the North Corridor, entitled the *Columbus Multimodal Transportation Corridor Study*, was completed in March 1995. The MIS concluded with the recommendation to expand bus service as the locally preferred alternative.

In 1999, COTA and MORPC completed the *Vision 2020: Transportation for a Great Community* system plan. This analysis focused on the transportation needs of the Central Ohio Area through the year 2020. The system plan made recommendations in the major areas of Bus Expansion; Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS); Commuter/Light Rail Transit; and a downtown circulator. As with earlier studies, Vision 2020 confirmed that the North Corridor had the best potential for cost-effective rail development.

Following the completion of the Vision 2020 plan, COTA and MORPC initiated the *North Corridor Major Investment Study Update*. This study updated the 1995 MIS and extended the horizon year for transportation improvement through 2025. The MIS update concluded in 2001 with the selection of a locally preferred strategy that included light rail transit and substantial bus service improvements in the corridor between the Polaris area and downtown Columbus. The proposed transit improvements are intended to improve mobility and access and to enhance economic and community development in the North Corridor. In addition to the North Corridor transit improvements, the plan included significant bus service improvements throughout the COTA service area.

The recommended strategy has been adopted as the North Corridor Light Rail Transit (NCLRT) Project. It is listed in the COTA Short Range Transit Plan (2001-2005). The adoption process was initiated with an extensive community outreach effort in April 2001. In May 2001 the COTA Board of Trustees voted to approve the NCLRT Project, and in June 2001, MORPC adopted the plan.

In November 2001, COTA and MORPC also completed work on the *Central Ohio Regional Rail Study*. The primary purpose of this study was investigate the realignment of existing freight rail service in Central Ohio in order to enhance opportunities for rail passenger service within the region. Information from this analysis was used in the *North Corridor Major Investment Study Update*.

In 2002, COTA requested FTA's permission to advance the NCLRT Project into Preliminary Engineering, including preparation of an EIS. FTA approved the request on January 10, 2002.

III. Description of the Study Area

The NCLRT project area is within the metropolitan area of Columbus, Ohio, in the City of Columbus, Franklin County and Delaware County. The transit alternative extends approximately 13 miles between the Franklin/Delaware County line and downtown Columbus and is centered on a path generally parallel to and west of Interstate 71 (I-71). The northern terminus of the study area extends to the vicinity of Lazelle Road at the Franklin County/Delaware County border and the southern terminus is the intersection of High Street and Fulton Street in downtown Columbus. The project area is generally bounded on the west by the Olentangy River and State Route (SR) 315, and on the east by SR 3 (Cleveland Avenue/ Westerville Road). Because the proposed transit alternative

includes the shared use of the CSX Transportation (CSXT) and Norfolk Southern (NS) railroad corridor, the EIS will also evaluate impacts on the regional freight railroad network in Central Ohio. The project area is shown in **Figure 1**.

Most of the project area is within the urban setting of the City of Columbus, but it includes the suburban communities of Minerva Park, Riverlea and portions of the cities of Worthington and Westerville. Several major activity centers are within the corridor and at the northern and southern termini, including cultural sites and districts, entertainment districts, hospitals, sport stadiums, colleges and universities, an exposition center, a convention center and a regional mall. The remainder of the corridor is primarily residential. Polaris, Crosswoods, Worthington, Easton, and the Short North are mixed use areas with an emphasis on retail and restaurants. The Ohio State House, the Arena District, Theater District, City Center, Science Center and redeveloping Brewery District are major traffic generators in the downtown area. The corridor has two large hospitals, Grant Hospital and the Ohio State University Medical Center, serving more than 50,000 patients each year. The corridor is home to the Ohio State University (OSU), Columbus State Community College and Franklin University. Four major sports stadiums are also in the corridor, including Ohio Stadium (home of OSU football), Schottenstein Center for basketball, Columbus Crew Soccer Stadium and Nationwide Arena. Other attractions include the Ohio Expositions Center, the Greater Columbus Convention Center, and the Veterans Memorial Hall.

The project area is now home to almost 233,000 people, and by 2025, the project area's resident population is expected to grow to more than 248,000 people. The North Corridor has approximately 235,000 jobs, which represents one-third of the region's total employment. By 2025, the number of jobs in the project area is expected to increase to 278,000. Due to the large and growing population and employment within the North Corridor, COTA's busiest bus route serves the OSU area, carrying approximately 13,000 riders per day.

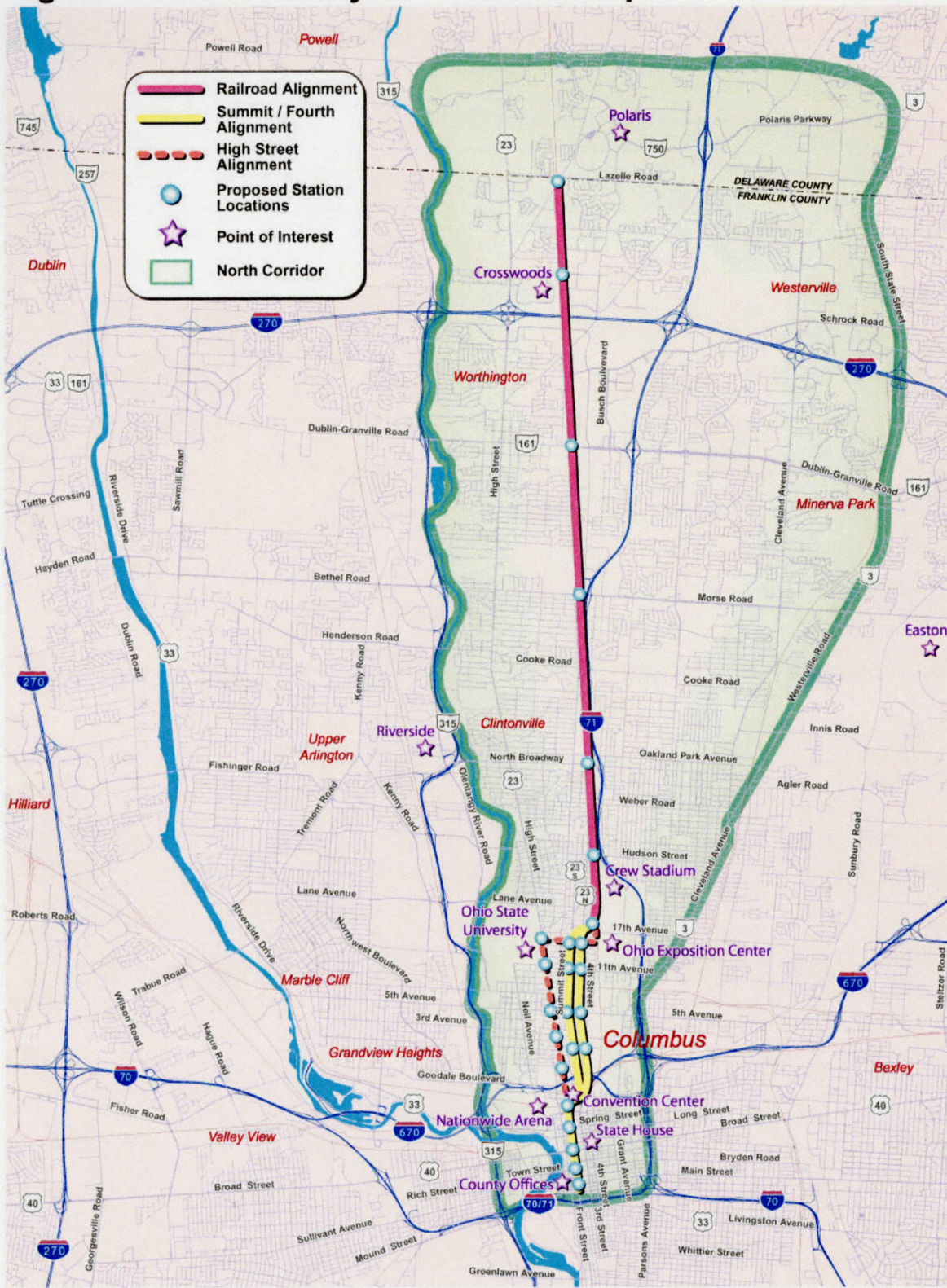
Major transportation facilities in the corridor include I-71, S.R. 315, and parallel CSXT and NS rail lines that bisect the corridor north and south, and I-670, I-70, and I-270 that cross the corridor east and west.

IV. Related Projects in the Columbus Area

Within the Columbus metropolitan area, numerous commercial, residential, and transportation projects that will be compatible with and enhanced by the NCLRT Project are being planned and implemented. Examples of these projects include:

- The Arena Terminal (Multimodal Transit Center) - The Center is located next to the Arena District, Nationwide Arena and the Greater Columbus Convention Center and will serve buses, rail, taxis, bicycles, and pedestrians. It is currently in the design phase.
- The Brewery District - A pedestrian-oriented entertainment district is developing with infill residential housing. It will include 800,000 square feet of new office/commercial space and 1,000 housing units.

Figure 1: NCLRT Project Location Map



- Jeffery Place– A 33-acre former industrial site at Second Avenue will be developed for mixed uses including 800 residences, retail space, 250,000 square feet of office space, a hotel, and a transit station.
- Interstate 70/71 South Innerbelt Major Investment Study – A planning study of the south leg of the Innerbelt is currently underway to identify and evaluate safety and operational improvements.
- Easton Interchange Highway Improvements – The final elements of the Morse Stelzer Collector Distributor roadway system are underway along SR 161 at Sunbury and I-270. .
- Interstate 270 Interchange Improvement Study – The Ohio Department of Transportation is examining potential Interchange improvements along I-270 at SR 315 and US 23.
- Intercity High Speed Rail – The Ohio Rail Development Commission (ORDC) is investigating potential routes to provide intercity rail passenger service in Ohio, which could include the existing railroad lines in the North Corridor.

V. Project Purpose and Need

As a result of the size and mix of the North Corridor's population, employment, activity centers and land uses, the North Corridor is considered the most congested area in the Columbus metropolitan area. The increasing automobile usage in the area is resulting in adverse environmental consequences, such as reduced air quality, increases in traffic-related noise levels, and loss of green space and neighborhoods in the face of demand for additional highway lanes. The increasing traffic congestion has impaired mobility in the North Corridor and impeded access to the primary activity centers and employment centers in the metropolitan area. Access to employment opportunities for low-income central city residents is diminishing as employment growth continues in the suburbs. In addition, access to an entry-level labor force is reduced for suburban employers.

COTA provides fixed route bus service in the corridor, but bus service alone may not be the most effective way to achieve the needed transportation improvements. The cost of providing transportation service is increasing and the available land for highway expansion is scarce. Right-of-way acquisition, construction, and maintenance costs are also rising. Transit services face budget constraints as COTA balances costs and revenue.

The purpose of the proposed North Corridor transit improvements is to address the transportation problems and travel needs within the North Corridor. The goals of the transportation improvements are to:

- Improve mobility and access in the North Corridor.
- Reduce adverse environmental impacts resulting from growth in vehicle miles traveled by attracting travelers to transit.
- Support reverse-commute access to employment in the North Corridor.
- Optimize transportation investments in the North Corridor to provide long-term, cost effective public infrastructure and services.

- Enhance economic and neighborhood development by preserving or improving access to existing major activity centers and neighborhood commercial districts.

VI. Scoping Process

Scoping is a federally mandated process that is designed to inform the public, interested groups, and involved agencies about the proposed project, alternatives, and potential issues at the beginning of an Environmental Impact Statement study and to solicit public and agency review and input. The main goal of the scoping meetings is to encourage the active participation of the public and agencies early in the decision-making process. It provides the public an opportunity to communicate issues and concerns to help develop alternatives before considerable resources have been expended.

Through the scoping process, the alternatives to be examined in the study and the impacts to be considered are identified, and the goals and objectives that will guide the evaluation of alternatives are established. Key issues are identified and the technical analyses that will address issues are defined. Citizens, agencies and community organizations are encouraged to comment early in the process so that they can provide input in setting the direction of the study, including the determination of which goals and objectives are to be pursued and which alternatives, issues and impacts are to be studied. All reasonable alternatives and potentially significant project impacts are identified and examined early in the process.

This scoping process will be conducted in cooperation with the FTA, COTA and MORPC. The scoping process will include the following activities:

- Public and agency scoping meetings to receive input to help refine proposed alternatives and identify potential environmental issues.
- Communications with affected local, regional, state, and federal agencies and other organizations regarding issues within their jurisdiction or concern.
- Careful consideration of written and oral comments made at the scoping meetings or received during the scoping comment period.
- Preparation of a Scoping Process Report describing the results of the scoping process, including comments received.
- Ongoing public and agency communication regarding the continued refinement of design alternatives.

Three public scoping meetings for the Environmental Impact Statement for transportation improvements within the North Corridor will be held at the following times and locations:

- **Tuesday, July 22, 2003** at Rhodes Office Tower, Lobby Hearing Room, 30 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH, from 8:00 to 10:00 AM. COTA will give a presentation on the proposed action at 8:30 AM.

- **Tuesday, July 22, 2003** at St. Stephen's Community House, 1500 17th Avenue, Columbus, OH from 6:00 to 8:00 PM. COTA will give a presentation on the proposed action at 6:30 PM.
- **Wednesday, July 23, 2003** at North Broadway United Methodist Church, 48 East North Broadway, Columbus, OH from 6:00 to 8:00 PM. COTA will give a presentation on the proposed action at 6:30 PM.

In addition to the public scoping meetings, an interagency scoping meeting will be conducted with agency personnel at the following time and place:

- **Thursday, July 24, 2003** at Central Ohio Transit Authority Rail Development Office, Main Conference Room, 3rd Floor, 1650 Lake Shore Drive, Columbus, OH from 10:00 AM to 12:00 PM.

The locations of the scoping meetings are accessible to persons with disabilities. Any individual with a disability who requires special assistance to participate in the scoping meetings should contact Mr. Michael L. Bradley, Director of Rail Development, Central Ohio Transit Authority, 1650 Lake Shore Drive, Suite 300, Columbus, OH 43204 or call the project info line at 1-866-RAILCOTA (866-724-5268), (COTA TDD: 614-228-1832 available 8:30 AM – 5:30 PM, Monday through Friday), or send an email to info@cotafasttrax.com by July 14, 2003 in order for COTA to make necessary arrangements.

COTA staff will be present at the scoping meetings to describe corridor alternatives, describe the proposed analysis, and receive comments. Project staff will be available before and after the meetings to answer questions. Additional opportunities for public participation will be provided throughout the EIS preparation to review findings and results and to solicit comments. Interested persons will be notified of project progress through a continuing community information program and materials distributed to the project mailing list that will include all scoping participants.

Written comments are encouraged from all interested parties and will be accepted by the project staff throughout the scoping comment period, which ends August 15, 2003. Any comments received after August 15, 2003, will be considered during the project development process, but may not be included in the Scoping Process Report. Written comments may be handed to a COTA representative at the Scoping Meetings or may be mailed to the Project Contact Information addresses shown on page 1 of this Scoping Information Package. Written comments may also be submitted via the project email address shown on page 1.

VII. Scoping Comment Opportunities

The FTA and COTA are committed to the concept that public participation is an essential and vital part of this study and are working to ensure that members of the public have a voice in the planning process. A public involvement program has been designed for this study to encourage public participation throughout the study. Opportunities for ongoing involvement by the public include:

- Public Meetings, including these scoping meetings
- Newsletters and Bulletins
- Comment Forms
- Project website: www.cotafasttrax.com
- Toll-free Project Telephone Line: 866-RAIL-COTA (866-724-5268)
- Project email address: info@cotafasttrax.com
- Requests for Presentations/ Speakers Bureau
- Public Hearings

The scoping meetings are designed to provide the public with an early opportunity to learn about the study's purpose and process, and to encourage communication with COTA, MORPC, and the consultant team about your issues and ideas. COTA will accept written comments any time between the meeting dates and the end of the scoping comment period, on August 15, 2003.

VIII. Project Development Process

The NCLRT project is being advanced in accordance with the project development process through which federal, state, and local officials plan and make decisions regarding transit capital investments.

The project is currently in Preliminary Engineering, and an Environmental Impact Statement will be prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, as amended (NEPA). The FTA is the federal lead agency and COTA is the local lead agency for the project. The lead agencies will seek the cooperation of the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) and MORPC, the metropolitan planning organization (MPO) responsible for transportation planning in metropolitan Columbus.

In accordance with FTA policy, all federal laws, regulations and executive orders affecting project development, including but not limited to the regulations of the Council on Environmental Quality and FTA implementing NEPA (40 CFR Parts 1500-1508 and 23 CFR Part 771), the Clean Air Act, Section 404 of the Clean Water Act, Executive Orders 11988, 11990 and 12898 regarding floodplains, wetlands, and environmental justice, respectively, the National Historic Preservation Act, the Endangered Species Act, and Section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act, will be addressed to the maximum extent practicable during the NEPA process.

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) will be circulated to solicit public and agency comments on the proposed action. Public hearings will be held on the DEIS. Based on the comments received on the DEIS, COTA will prepare the Final EIS, which will identify the preferred alternative. A Record of Decision (ROD) finalizing the commitments and mitigation measures described in the FEIS is scheduled for March 2005, which will conclude the NEPA process.

In 2005, COTA will request approval to enter Final Design and a Full Funding Grant Agreement from FTA. Upon FTA's approval the project will proceed into final design and right-of-way acquisition. Construction of the project would start in 2006 and be completed by late 2008, when revenue service would begin.

IX. Project Alternatives

The scoping meetings, other community meetings, and written comments will be a major source of alternatives for consideration in the EIS. Transportation alternatives proposed for consideration in the North Corridor will include:

1. A No-Action Alternative, which is the continuation of existing bus service policies in the study area. Under the No-Action Alternative, increases in service to the year 2025 would track with increases in demand due to population or employment growth in the area, in accordance with current service policies.
2. A Transportation System Management (TSM) Alternative, which focuses on operational and low to medium cost capital improvements to bus transit routes and service in the project area, and attempts to serve the project purpose and need as closely as possible without the construction of a new fixed guideway.
3. Build Alternatives, comprised of Light Rail Transit (LRT) combined with enhanced bus service. The LRT route extends about 13 miles from the Polaris area to the Columbus Central Business District. From Polaris to about 17th Street, the light rail line is proposed to be located in railroad right-of-way (ROW) parallel to the CSXT Columbus line and NS Sandusky-Columbus rail lines. Street running operations are proposed for the light rail line from the vicinity of 17th Street to Fulton Street in the Downtown. The proposed street running alignments south of 17th Street would be along Summit and/or Fourth Streets with a transition to High Street at I-670. An alternative alignment with street running operations along High Street between approximately 17th Street and I-670 that would more directly serve the Ohio State University campus may also be considered. **Figure 1** shows the locations of the proposed light rail lines.

Two options are under consideration for the portion of the project that is located in the railroad ROW between Polaris and about 17th Street:

- The Consolidated Plan, which would construct the NCLRT within the railroad ROW and all existing freight rail tracks and operations would be maintained by relocating tracks and consolidating the freight operations in the corridor.
- The Enhanced Plan, in which certain freight railroad operations would be combined and/ or relocated out of the corridor, providing more space for construction of the NCLRT. Under the Enhanced Plan, COTA would locate and design a new Freight Railroad Intermodal Facility to replace existing CSXT Intermodal operations at the Buckeye yard. The new intermodal facility would be located in the Central Ohio area and would also include associated connections to the existing rail network. **Figure 2** shows potential location of the new intermodal facility in Delaware or Union Counties.

Figure 2: Potential Intermodal Yard Locations



Fourteen potential transit stations would be located to serve potential trip generators and in areas where economic development activities are planned or underway. The locations of stations and resulting impacts will be an important area of consideration during the study. A yard and shop facility for the maintenance of the light rail vehicles would also be located in the North Corridor as part of the project.

Based on public and agency input received during scoping, variations of the above alternatives and other transportation-related improvement options, both transit and non-transit, will be considered for the North Corridor.

X. Assessment of Impacts

The FTA and COTA will evaluate all social, economic and environmental impacts of the alternatives analyzed in the EIS. Impacts may include: land use, zoning, and economic development; secondary development; cumulative impacts; land acquisition, displacements, and relocation of existing uses; historic and archaeological resources; parklands and recreation areas; visual and aesthetic qualities; neighborhoods and communities; environmental justice; air quality; noise and vibration; hazardous materials; ecological resources; threatened and endangered species; water resources; wetlands and floodplains, energy; construction impacts; safety and security; utilities; finance; and transportation. Other potential impact issues may be added as a result of scoping and agency coordination efforts. The proposed impact assessment and evaluation will take into account both beneficial and adverse effects, direct and indirect impacts, short-term (construction) and long-term impacts, and cumulative effects. Measures to avoid or mitigate any significant adverse impacts will be developed. The subjects and level of detail addressed in the EIS will be consistent with the requirements of the joint FTA/FHWA environmental regulations (23 CFR 771 and 40 CFR 1500-1508) and other related regulations.

XI. Project Timeline

A timeline of major project activities and milestones for the NCLRT Preliminary Engineering and EIS is shown Figure 3:

**Figure 3
Schedule of Major Preliminary Engineering and EIS Milestone Activities**

