

APPENDIX C: LIGHT RAIL VS COMMUTER RAIL

With the failure of referendums for a local LRT funding match at the ballot box in both Columbus and Cincinnati, local transit agencies in both cities have refocused on development of their bus systems. Therefore, if commuter rail is to be successfully advanced in either city, it must clearly communicate how these proposed systems would differ from what had been rejected by the voters before.

Some key differences between Commuter Rail and LRT projects are –

- Commuter rail uses FRA-compliant vehicles that meet the buff strength requirements for mainline rail operations, sharing tracks with other rail services that operate on the national rail network. Because they use the same tracks along with freight and intercity passenger rail, commuter rail typically uses larger and heavier vehicles than LRT.

- Because commuter rail vehicles typically are larger and heavier than LRT, they typically offer better comfort for longer trips than are typically carried by LRT systems. Commuter rail typically serves suburban trips of 20-50 miles that extend beyond the range of typical urban transit systems, and operate at higher speeds than do LRT systems. In fact commuter systems often operate “express” once inside the urbanized area since they are intended to serve longer distance, regional trips rather than short distance local trips.

- Commuter systems typically are focused on work-trip, peak-hour travel as an alternative to driving; whereas LRT attracts a broader range of trip purposes and often a substantial share of their ridership comes from transit dependent riders.

- Again because the commuter rail vehicles are larger and heavier, they are less able to operate on city streets than LRT, and generally need direct rail access to downtown stations. In contrast, LRT uses separate tracks which cannot, under current safety regulations, be shared at the same time with intercity rail.

As a result, commuter rail technologies that share tracks with freight and intercity passenger trains have distinctly different operating characteristics than LRT, and they tend to serve different kinds of travel markets.