



MID-OHIO REGIONAL
MORPC
PLANNING COMMISSION

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**House Bill 74
Interested Party Testimony
February 18, 2021
House Finance Committee
William Murdock, Executive Director, Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission**

Chair Oelslager, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Crawley, and members of the House Finance Committee: thank you for the opportunity to submit written interested party testimony regarding House Bill 74 (HB 74), the 2022-2023 state transportation budget.

My name is William Murdock, and I am the Executive Director of the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC). MORPC is the regional council for Central Ohio and a voluntary association of 75 diverse local governments from urban, rural, and suburban communities. We provide programs, services, and funding related to transportation, land use, data, sustainability, and economic prosperity.

Our role in transportation in our region is critical. MORPC serves as the federally designated metropolitan planning organization (MPO) for transportation planning in the Columbus urbanized area. This means MORPC has transportation responsibilities and funding per federal law. MORPC also works to provide transportation and planning products and services to the Central Ohio Rural Planning Organization (CORPO), which is part of the rural transportation organization program with the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT). Finally, we work with our communities to access other transportation programs from the Ohio Public Works Commission, Ohio Development Services, and more.

One of our chief public policy goals is to achieve an advanced, inclusive, and exceptional transportation system that connects Central Ohio's people and products to the world. In working to achieve this goal, we collaborate with districts of the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT), local governments, businesses, and the community to implement transportation projects throughout our region from roads, safety, and bridges to transit, trails, and advanced technology.

We have four recommendations for your consideration in helping to position our region—and across the entire state—for prosperity and growth in infrastructure.

Increasing Funds for Transit

We thank members of the 133rd Ohio General Assembly for their leadership in dedicating \$70 million of GRF funding per year for public transit in the last budget. You were right then, and we must continue forward today. It is imperative that we restore the funding that you approved in the last budget of \$70 million per fiscal year in public transit funding. Central Ohio communities know first-hand of the need for an improved transit system. It's not an urban issue. It's not a rural issue. It's an Ohio issue. No matter where they live, insufficient funding means we are underserving too many Ohioans.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed how important public transportation is to our communities, even those that are not generally considered transit-dependent. Communities with larger populations of older adults and lower-income or essential workers have continued to see high levels of demand for public transit, and we're working to ensure communities across our region are strategically looking at what's necessary for the whole region to do better economically.

Our workforce is asking for better and more affordable transit options. This demand is in every region of our state, and we request the committee take a step forward by creating dedicated funding sources for transit. Improving our transit system is a critical need and will assist people in rural and urban communities who need access to transit to connect them to their job, hospital, or place of worship. It would also provide needed services for older adults and for those unable to drive.

Ohio can no longer remain one of the worst in the nation for state assistance in funding transit. We cannot expect to grow our workforce or serve our most vulnerable without protecting these dollars. ODOT's own Transit Needs Assessment in 2014 clearly demonstrated state funding needed for public transit by 2025 at \$185 million annually, which would only be 10 percent of the anticipated combined spending by Ohio's transit agencies (\$1.84 billion). The current budget proposal is simply not sufficient to ensure Ohioans have the transit they need. Transit accessibility is a top concern for workforce growth and economic development—especially for large, growing employers. We simply cannot compete on some employer site selection projects because of insufficient transit funding. Investing in transit will create jobs and make Ohio more competitive.

Making Roadways Safer for Everyone

Transportation technology is evolving quickly, and we consider ourselves lucky to be working on transformative transportation policy during this period of innovation. Advances in technology can increase efficiency, heighten safety, and provide better services. Yet, technology can be a double-edged sword, and distracted driving is an unintended consequence of such advancement.

Distracted driving is a growing trend that has caused an increase in deaths and injuries on our roads. In 2019, there were 222 fatalities and 1275 serious injuries from crashes in Central Ohio alone. This is devastating for too many families here and across Ohio. There's also an economic cost: MORPC estimates the societal cost of these serious crashes is \$3.94 billion.

MORPC has a long history of working closely with local communities to ensure residents are safe while traveling. Our safety program staff actively analyze crash data, so we can better understand why crashes occur and how certain populations, behaviors, and locations are more susceptible to a deadly traffic crash. Like many employers, MORPC has an internal policy that bans staff from distracted driving. It is for these reasons and more that we strongly support broadening the existing texting-while-driving prohibition in the Ohio Revised Code (ORC) to prohibit using an electronic wireless communications device (EWCD) while driving and make the use of an EWCD while driving a primary offense, rather than a secondary offense.



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Another central public policy goal for MORPC and its local governments is to raise awareness of racial and social justice issues and work to continually improve communities within our growing region. Although it is urgent for us to pass this bill, we must also be mindful of potential unintended consequences. In the book *Suspect Citizens: What 20 Million Traffic Stops Tell Us About Policing and Race*, Frank R. Baumgartner, Derek A. Epp, and Kelsey Shoub found that compared to their share in the population, Black drivers are almost twice as likely to be pulled over as white drivers, even though white people drive more on average. They also discovered that Black drivers are more likely to be searched following a stop. Just by getting in a car, a Black driver has about twice the odds of being pulled over, and about four times the odds of being searched. This is tragic and unacceptable. Every proposal on safety should consider how to improve this situation.

With simple changes to the current proposal, Ohio could ensure distracted driving legislation makes every Ohioan safer. There is an established path to curb the impacts of distracted driving while preventing unintended consequences. Multiple states have already adopted legislative language to address concerns over racial profiling. We respectfully request that Ohio do the same. We request the committee offer an amendment to this portion of the bill that would require law enforcement officers to inform a person who is pulled over for distracted driving that they have the right to decline a search of their vehicle. We also ask that the committee consider some type of data mechanism of people who are pulled over for distracted driving, to ensure Black and minority drivers are not specifically being targeted.

Investing in Rural Ohio

A new and effective tool for transportation development in Ohio is a Regional or Rural Transportation Planning Organizations (RTPO). RTPOs develop transportation plans to better prepare rural and Appalachian communities for both safety and economic growth. As mentioned above, MORPC works closely with seven Central Ohio counties on transportation planning services for rural areas throughout the region. Staffed by MORPC and guided by both the CORPO committee and county-level subcommittees, we also recently developed CORPO's first Transportation Improvement Program (TIP).

Now that rural areas across the state—including in Central Ohio—have clearly identified their needs, it's time to invest more than just planning dollars. Finding new funding streams for communities across the state, such as providing a dedicated capital funds to RPTOs, would better prepare these vibrant communities for future investment in infrastructure and economic development. We support our partners at the Ohio Rural Development Association in this effort.

Developing Regional Trail Networks

Central Ohio Greenways (COG) is a trail network of national significance spanning more than 230 miles, connecting Central Ohio to other parts of the state and country. These trails are traveled more than 12 million miles annually providing economic, quality of life, and health benefits to the community. MORPC is dedicated to working with the COG Board to increase the number of people using the regional trail system through trail network expansions.



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With Central Ohio expected to become a region of three million people over the next 30 years—bringing an increased demand for more walkable neighborhoods and transportation options—trails have become a critical element for providing a high quality of life to a diverse population. New trail miles would extend existing trails, fill gaps in trail corridors, connect neighborhoods to job centers, and create a more interconnected regional trail network useful for both transportation and recreation. Rural, suburban, and urban communities across our region are investing public, private, and philanthropic funds to build more trails, but these efforts move slowly without additional state investment. We are grateful for the continued partnership of the state and strongly supported the allocation in the state capital budget of \$12.5 million to the Clean Ohio Trails program.

During a very uncertain time for our state and country, we commend Governor DeWine and ODOT Director Marchbanks for their leadership in crafting a budget that addresses the state's urgent need for sustainable transportation funds. We strongly advocate for solutions to help all of Ohio's rural, suburban, and urban communities and each region's unique needs. We sincerely appreciate the committee's work and willingness to navigate such an important and critical issue, and we look forward to continuing our important work together.

Please do not hesitate to contact me, at 614-233-4101 or at wmurdock@morpc.org, with any questions or whenever MORPC can be of service.

Kind Regards,

William Murdock, AICP
Executive Director, Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission