



MID-OHIO REGIONAL
MORPC
PLANNING COMMISSION

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Memorandum

TO: Representatives Oelslager, Plummer, & Crawley
Senators Dolan, Gavarone, & Sykes

FROM: William Murdock, MORPC Executive Director

DATE: June 16, 2021

SUBJECT: Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission State Operating Budget Letter of Interest

The Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC) is a regional council of 75 communities across Central Ohio's rural, suburban, and urban areas. MORPC's membership consists of cities, townships, counties, villages, and other government entities. Our policy stances reflect the collective voice of a very diverse group of local governments in Central Ohio.

Central Ohio local governments view House Bill 110 as an opportunity to collaborate with the state in finding solutions for our residents. As your work to finalize the operating budget, we urge you to consider the below two recommendations which will help position our region and state for prosperity.

Expanding Affordable Broadband Services

We strongly oppose the inclusion of Comp Doc Item LOCCD39 that effectively prohibits new local government broadband systems and severely restricts the ability of existing systems to serve new customers. We know many Ohioans lack broadband service, a fact that was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. If enacted, the amendment would prevent Ohio communities from implementing much needed community broadband initiatives and public-private broadband partnerships.

The proposed amendments would even thwart our plans to leverage federal funds, despite the fact that U.S. Treasury guidance explicitly allows for this funding to be used for broadband, to address the state's digital divide through broadband deployment, broadband adoption, and digital inclusion efforts. Finally, this amendment was adopted without any prior vetting or interested party meetings. By comparison, House Bill 2 (HB2) was deliberated over three different Ohio General Assemblies and received many productive interested party meetings, which resulted in good compromise language between all the stakeholders. The underlying language represents a monumental shift in broadband policy and severely limits our communities' ability to meet the needs of Ohioans. Passing such a change with no opportunity for debate and feedback is hasty and counterproductive.

William Murdock, AICP
Executive Director

Karen J. Angelou
Chair

Erik J. Janas
Vice Chair

Chris Amorose Grooms
Secretary

The unprecedented amount of federal dollars, most of which will come through public and private partnerships, is an opportunity to leverage these dollars. In short, Ohio can't compete with other states without better and more affordable broadband access. That's why MORPC strongly supported the passage of HB2, which appropriates \$20 million and creates the residential broadband expansion program.

This legislation is a necessary start, but more needs to be done to assist residents and businesses. Therefore, we seek your support for the House version of OBMCD39 which would reinstate \$190 million in funding for broadband adoption. While a significant start, this does not come close to adequately addressing the digital divide in our state. In fact, following an informal request by BroadbandOhio, more than \$250 million worth of potential projects were identified to bring broadband service to Ohioans who currently do not have service. Without additional funding, this need will continue to grow. Reinstating the dollars for the Residential Broadband Expansion Program will put Ohio on track to continuing to close the broadband gap throughout the Buckeye State.

Public Meeting Flexibility

Ten times a year MORPC convenes its commission to determine the strategic direction of the agency. Our local government members appoint elected officials and staff to serve as their representatives. Over 140 Central Ohio leaders serve on the board. From a staffing perspective one unintended consequence of the pandemic which proved to be valuable was the increase in participation in our virtual public meetings such as our commission meetings. Member engagement rose because our members did not have to worry about long commutes. For example, the Morrow County Commissioners office is a 53-minute drive to MORPC's office without traffic, thus a nearly two-hour round trip. In fact, our members encouraged us to advocate for legislation that provides all local governments the ability to hold public meetings virtually and in perpetuity and to use new forms of technology for communications, official notices, contracts, and outreach.

Therefore, we support the House version of LOCCD19 that would allow public bodies to continue to meet using electronic technology until December 31, 2021. Central Ohio is diverse as some communities are more prepared to convene in-person public meetings on a regular basis than others. We are over 20 years into the 21st century and should take advantage of contemporary resources to ensure our communities are safe, ready, and efficient as they reopen.

Thank you for your consideration of these items of concern and opportunity. 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 when MORPC can be of assistance.

Kind Regards,



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

