



Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission Monthly Legislative Update

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MID-OHIO REGIONAL
MORPC
PLANNING COMMISSION

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COVID-19 State Update

Governor DeWine Signs HB 197 to Help State with Pandemic

Following swift passage of a bill to provide assistance to state and local government, businesses, taxpayers, and students, Governor DeWine signed into law House Bill 197. Provisions of the bill are effective immediately due to the bill's emergency clause.

Some highlights of the bill include:

- » **Public meetings and hearings:** Allows state boards and commissions and local and county governments to meet by teleconference with full public notice and participation;
- » **Extension of absent voting in 2020 primary election:** Extends absent voting in the March 17, 2020, primary election through April 28, 2020 and authorizes a \$7 million appropriation to help cover counties' absentee ballot and postage costs;
- » **Unemployment compensation**
 - » Codifies the Governor's expansion of unemployment compensation to Ohioans idled by COVID-19;
 - » Suspends a requirement that an individual serve a waiting period before receiving unemployment benefits during the period of emergency declared by Executive Order 2020-01D, dated March 9, 2020, but not beyond December 1, 2020;
- » **Temporary tax compliance relief**
 - » Extends the state's tax filing deadline to align with the amended federal deadline of Wednesday, July 15;
 - » For municipal income tax purposes, treats income earned by an employee required to work at a temporary worksite because of the emergency as being earned at the employee's principal place of work;
- » **Professional licenses:** Extends drivers' and professional licenses issued by state and local governments and provide a 90-day renewal period after the state of emergency expires;
- » **Public water service:** Adds public water service to the electric and gas non-disconnection order issued by the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO);
- » **Medicaid COVID-19 community providers:** Gives the Ohio Department of Medicaid (ODM) "flexibility" to protect the health care system from workforce and patient-access shortages;

In response to enactment of HB 197, MORPC Executive Director William Murdock said, "On behalf of MORPC and over 70 Central Ohio local government members we thank [Governor DeWine for his] leadership and swift action over the last several weeks to confront both the public health crisis caused by the Coronavirus and COVID-19, as well as the economic challenges associated with this unprecedented situation. Local governments are on the frontlines of our nation's local public health emergency response and overall public safety efforts. Now, more than ever, local, state, and federal governments must work together to address this crisis. It is in this vein that we thank [Governor DeWine] and offer our strong support of Substitute House Bill 197."



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COVID-19 News

COVID-19 Federal Update

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the President signed a 2.2 trillion dollar emergency relief package better known as the CARES Act. The package will deliver, 500 billion dollars for distressed industries, 300 billion in direct payments to people and assists people with unemployment insurance. The bill also includes \$242 billion dollars in emergency funding. Of that emergency funding, more than 75% or 186 billion is being provided to state and local governments. These funds will help local public health departments, emergency management agencies and law enforcement. The CARES Act also appropriates \$25 billion for transit.

Although, MORPC supports the CARES Act, it didn't solve the revenue shortfall local governments face. This is something that will need to be addressed in a potential Phase 4 stimulus bill, which the House has already begun drafting. The President stated recently he would like to see a \$2 trillion-dollar infrastructure package within a phase 4 bill. Both the Senate and House are expected to reconvene on April 20.

Aging

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is releasing more than \$8.8 million to help provide senior citizens with meals and \$3.2 million to help 51 Ohio community health centers during the coronavirus pandemic, according to U.S. Senator Sherrod Brown (D-OH). Brown helped secure the funding in a package passed by Congress earlier in March, in addition to \$15.6 million for Ohio preparedness efforts in a separate supplemental spending bill on coronavirus. The HHS Administration for Community Living (ACL) is providing funds to help local communities provide meals to senior citizens during the coronavirus outbreak, in partnership with the area agencies on aging. The Ohio Department of Aging will distribute those funds toward programs such as Meals on Wheels.

Rainy Day Fund

The Ohio Department of Health is posting daily updates on confirmed and suspected cases and test results at coronavirus.ohio.gov and has established a call center hotline at 1-833-4-ASK-ODH (1-833-427-5634), which is available from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily.

House Speaker Larry Householder said Tuesday that lawmakers will likely tap the rainy day fund to close an expected budget gap due to the coronavirus public health crisis.

The move was expected as the state's economy has largely come to a standstill due to COVID-19. Overall tax receipts in March were down \$159.4 million, or 10.5%, from what analysts projected, the Office of Budget and Management reported Monday.

"We're sitting on a \$2.7 billion fund, and we're looking at some significant shortfalls in our budget. That budget stabilization fund is going to literally help stabilize our budget," the Glenford Republican said during an appearance on WOSU's [All Sides with Ann Fisher](#).

Gov. Mike DeWine has also signaled he may seek to utilize the fund as Ohio emerges from the pandemic.

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Local Government Response

The leader of the County Commissioners Association of Ohio called Gov. Mike DeWine's latest move to combat the spreading coronavirus "difficult but necessary."

The statement from CCAO President Carl Davis came after Gov. DeWine Thursday announced the extension of the ongoing stay-at-home order to May 1. The order was initially to expire Monday.

"The governor's decision to extend the stay at home order is a difficult but necessary action to protect the health and safety of all Ohioans," Mr. Davis said. "Ohio and its counties share a common enemy in COVID-19, but we know that by working together as one, in partnership, this is a challenge we will overcome. We thank Gov. DeWine for his strong and steady leadership."

At the same time, the Ohio Municipal League joined a call to action as municipalities ask for specifics on how the recent federal stimulus law will support state and local governments through the Coronavirus Response Fund. The organization said the fund is aimed at supporting governments with populations of at least 500,000 and that smaller local entities could receive funds directly from the state's share. The final language of the bill, however, has led some to think states could be restricted in supporting those smaller entities, OML said.

"During a call with local governments and state leagues this week, a U.S. Treasury official confirmed that states can grant funds to local governments so long as those funds are used in the same way as it is used by the states as outlined in the statute," according to OML. "However, there is now concern that the language defining how those funds could be used is too restrictive. The U.S. Treasury is reviewing the language and says it will provide a final determination and guidance on this issue."

S&P Global Ratings continues assessing the potential "deteriorating credit conditions" for state and local governments resulting from the pandemic. The ratings agency published a new report saying that updates will be made as more information comes to light and economic forecasts continue to evolve.

"Given the abruptness and scale of the economic decline in the U.S., we anticipate broad budgetary pressure as expenditures escalate and revenue streams contract," said S&P Global Ratings Credit Analyst Oscar Padilla. "In the near term, rating transitions will more likely be linked to issuers with limited liquidity and availability of alternative source of short-term cash, narrower payment streams, and concentrated economic bases."

Paid Sick Leave

Swiftly passing federal paid sick leave legislation is one of the most important actions the government could take to blunt the spread of novel coronavirus, U.S. Senator Sherrod Brown (D-OH) told reporters in a call Wednesday. Brown introduced a bill on that as part of a broader package put forward by Senate Democrats, saying all are at risk when those without paid sick leave have to work while ill to avoid going without pay. U.S. Rep. Tim Ryan (D-Niles) introduced similar legislation in the U.S. House Wednesday as well, and Brown said he expected that would be passed by the House in the coming days.

Transportation + Infrastructure

Speaker Nancy Pelosi shifted her tone on last week, calling for a much more focused "phase four" relief package to address immediate needs related to the coronavirus pandemic, a departure from the sprawling legislation she and other top Democrats were pushing earlier this week.

Both in a television appearance and talking with reporters, Pelosi said it's clear the next phase of relief funds should be an expansion of the massive \$2 trillion package the president signed into law last week — more money to aid states, cities and small businesses, expand unemployment benefits and another round of direct cash payments for Americans.

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“Let’s do the same bill we just did, make some changes to make it current,” Pelosi told reporters in the Capitol Friday. “While I’m very much in favor of doing some things we need to do to meet the needs — clean water, more broadband, the rest of that — that may have to be for a bill beyond that right now,” she added during an appearance on CNBC.

The California Democrat said she would still push for some top Democratic priorities, including adjusting the classification for Washington, D.C., allowing it to receive an amount of federal aid in line with what states are eligible for and pushing for additional federal worker protections for first responders and emergency personnel.

Pelosi and top House Democrats were making a very different pitch — saying now was the time to think big and take a broad brush approach to addressing the economic downturn, pushing ideas like a massive infrastructure package to help jump-start the economy.

“This is so essential because of the historic nature of the health and economic emergency that we are confronting,” Pelosi said on a call with reporters Wednesday, pitching Democrats’ ideas for the “Phase 4” bill. “We must take bold action to renew America’s infrastructure,” she added, ticking off a list of proposals including clean water provisions, expansion of rural broadband and more funding for community health centers.

But while President Donald Trump also backed the idea of a multitrillion dollar infrastructure package, Pelosi’s pitch was met with staunch opposition from other senior Republicans, including Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. And privately, some Democrats have expressed concerns that such a broad plan risked alienating voters, especially if Republicans were able to convincingly claim Democrats were more focused on liberal priorities than addressing immediate coronavirus-related needs.

“We may need a phase four, but we’re not even fully into ‘phase three’ yet,” McConnell told reporters earlier this week. Other Republicans were much more direct — for example Senator John Kennedy (R-La.) described Pelosi’s plan as “[spending porn](#).”

Pelosi’s pivot comes after startling new unemployment numbers were released showing a record 10 million Americans applying for jobless benefits in the last two weeks. The numbers are expected to [rise dramatically](#) in the coming weeks as federal agencies process claims that have been filed in the past few weeks, as the coronavirus pandemic started shuttering the U.S. economy.

A source close to Pelosi said the alarming unemployment numbers have influenced her thinking on the need to limit the focus of the next legislative package but cautioned that nothing is set in stone as Democrats have yet to even draft a bill. A timeline for any legislative action remains uncertain. Both the House and Senate are out of session until April 20 and that could be extended even longer if congressional leaders feel it isn’t safe for members to travel to and work in the Capitol.

State transportation departments are asking for \$50 billion in the next coronavirus recovery package — along with the passage of a long-term surface transportation bill. In a letter sent earlier this week to House and Senate leaders, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials noted that state DOTs are expecting to see revenues decrease 30 percent over the next 18 months. Personal travel has dropped between 38 and 44 percent nationally as of March 27.

Broadband

Lawmakers say the ongoing coronavirus pandemic only bolsters their case for passage of a priority House bill to facilitate the expansion of high-speed internet access.

Ohioans are relying on broadband more than ever as schools shift to online learning to curb the risk of face-to-face transmission of COVID-19 and a wave of workers displaced by government-mandated closures file online for unemployment compensation.

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“The crisis has further revealed the gross disparity of broadband coverage throughout the state,” Rep. Rick Carfagna (R-Genoa Twp.) said in an interview. Rep. Carfagna and Rep. Michael O’Brien (D-Warren) are lead cosponsors of a measure (HB 13) that would in part establish a Residential Broadband Expansion Program under the Development Services Agency to provide grants to municipal corporations and townships to fund broadband projects.

Although broadband providers in some cases have stepped up during the COVID-19 emergency to offer free access, that service won’t continue once normalcy resumes. And broad areas of the state remain without access in places where providers don’t believe it makes financial sense to expand without government assistance.

About 300,000 households – or about 1 million Ohioans – lack adequate access to high-speed internet, which can serve as a barrier to jobs and education, sponsors said. That’s especially true, the pair said, after K-12 schools in Ohio were shuttered via executive order.

“This particular issue that requires learning at home through the internet strengthens the case for broadband throughout the state,” Rep. O’Brien said.

HB13 debuted in May and has had three hearings before the House Finance Committee, where it has received the backing of local government associations, the Ohio Farm Bureau and public libraries.

Employment/Unemployment

Ohio recorded 272,117 initial claims for unemployment compensation last week, setting a new all-time high as the coronavirus pandemic continues to take its toll on the state’s workforce. A total of 468,414 initial claims were filed last week and the prior week – a period that saw many businesses shuttered in an attempt to slow the virus’ spread – according to Department of Job and Family Services data released Thursday. The state received 364,603 new claims for all of 2019.

Over the period, the state has issued more than \$45 million in unemployment compensation payments to more than 108,000 workers.

The U.S. Department of Labor [reported](#) more than 6.6 million initial claims nationwide last week, up from more than 3.3 million the prior week. The totals smashed records for the history of the seasonally adjusted data, with the previous high of 695,000 set in October 1982.

ODJFS said that it has been “working around the clock” to increase capacity for its [online claims system](#) and reassigned more than 300 department employees to assist with calls regarding unemployment benefits.

“It’s important to keep in mind that during previous economic downturns, claims came in waves as the recession worsened and businesses closed gradually, over time,” the department said. “In this case, the claims came in all at once and created a tsunami. Such a large number of claims in a short period of time would tax any online system, especially one that is 16 years old.”

Lt. Gov. Jon Husted said at a Statehouse news conference more action to bolster the state’s unemployment benefits infrastructure is on the way. He said ODJFS Director Kimberly Hall told him the department intends to add 1,000 workers to the unemployment call center by the end of next week.

“They are bringing this online as fast as they can, but we know it’s still, for some of you, not enough,” he said. “It continues to improve. We’re also adding tech capacity to the 16-year-old system that we have trying to make sure this gets done right.” The lieutenant governor also noted the department had added weekend hours – 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturdays and 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Sundays – in the wake of the crisis.

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For residents seeking to return to the workforce immediately, Lt. Gov. Husted suggested they visit a new state [website](#) featuring available jobs at “essential” businesses that have remained open during the outbreak. He said nearly 12,000 open jobs have already been posted on the site.

“It’s literally a huge problem in those critical parts of our economy where businesses have been overwhelmed by the nature of how things have shifted in the demand that’s out there,” he said.

As the state’s restrictions on nonessential businesses and other activity continued this week, mass layoff notices continued to pile up at ODJFS. The automotive, food service and hospitality industries continued to be hit especially hard by the emergency. A handful of examples included the Great Wolf Lodge, which continued paying employees from March 16 through Wednesday with hopes of reopening its Mason and Sandusky locations Thursday. Instead, the firm informed the state it has put 789 workers on unpaid furlough through May 15.

Other firms cutting jobs for hundreds of workers recently included auto-parts supplier Greenville Technology, which announced indefinite layoffs of 535 employees in Darke County and Great Lakes Brewing Co., which furloughed 111 employees and laid off five in Cleveland.

Housing + Homelessness

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) announced that Ohio has received \$6 million in grants to support local homeless assistance programs in the state. HUD said grants are part of the current round of its Continuum of Care grants and will provide support to 22 Ohio programs on the front lines, serving individuals and families experiencing homelessness. Along with \$10.6 million for 284 projects in the first round of funding, Ohio has received \$112.6 million in Continuum of Care awards for FFY19.

While applauding Gov. Mike DeWine and Ohio Department of Health (ODH) Director Amy Acton for actions they’ve taken to control the spread of COVID-19, housing advocates said the state must now focus on addressing infection rates in one of the state’s most vulnerable populations -- the homeless. “A stay-at-home order is meaningless if your home is a tent in the woods or a large shelter,” said Barbara Poppe, former executive director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, who also has a master’s degree in epidemiology. Poppe, author of the Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio’s (COHHIO) new report, “[Double Jeopardy: The Coronavirus & Homelessness in Ohio](#),” discussed her research during an online press conference Wednesday.

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