

Testimony

By Virgil Strickler, General Manager of the Ohio Expositions Commission

Before the House Finance Committee on Agriculture, Development, and Natural Resources

FY 2018-19 Budget Hearing

Good morning. My name is Virgil Strickler. I want to thank you for allowing me this opportunity to speak to you today and inform you of the Ohio Expositions Commission's plans for the future.

The Commission's mission is as follows: *To professionally operate and maintain for public benefit a year-round, service oriented event facility and produce the annual Ohio State Fair.*

Our vision is as follows: *To be recognized as a unique, dynamic and profitable facility committed to creating a nationally recognized event venue and producing the highest quality agricultural state fair.*

The Commission operates the Ohio Expo Center, a year-round, multipurpose convention and meeting facility. The Expo Center is host to five of Columbus' top 10 conventions and approximately 185 annual events held in multiple onsite facilities, an increase of 50 percent (60 events) from 2010. These events generate an estimated 3.2 million visitors each and every year. The Expo Center creates a substantial economic impact on the City of Columbus, Franklin County and the state of Ohio. The most recent economic impact study indicated that total direct and indirect expenditure impact is estimated at more than \$478 million. These expenditures generate approximately \$14 million in local, county and state tax revenues and support nearly 4,600 full and part-time jobs.

Our management and Commission are incredibly thankful for the capital funding that has been allocated to the Ohio Expo Center. The construction of a new agricultural facility and a contemporary multi-purpose exhibition building, as well as the renovation of the Gilligan Building, will allow us to retain existing events as well as attract new events to the state of Ohio. The current renovation of the Celeste Center will be the first major upgrade to the facility since its inception in 1991. The renovation will assist in attracting major entertainment acts to the Ohio State Fair as well as increasing the potential dates available for non-fair rental by decreasing the time to turn the facility over. These recent renovations have greatly enhanced our facilities, making us one of the most unique and versatile event venues in the Midwest, attracting new and exciting events such as 2016's immensely successful Chinese Lantern Festival. Conversely, the closure of nearby event facilities in Central Ohio has increased the demand for rental space at the Ohio Expo Center, pushing our staff to continually work overtime to service events and please event-goers.

While the events held here at the Ohio Expo Center do make up for roughly half of our revenue, we wouldn't be who we are without our premier event – the Ohio State Fair. This summer, on July 26, 2017, the Ohio State Fair will open its gates for the 164th time. Over the past several years, extra efforts with grounds beautification, cleanliness, customer service, free entertainment and comfort areas have enhanced both the public and media

perceptions of the fair. As a result, the Ohio State Fair attracts more than 900,000 visitors during its 12-day run and enjoys strong support from local and statewide organizations, sponsors and media.

The Ohio State Fair notably boasts exhibitors from each of Ohio's 88 counties. Whether they are young people exhibiting a 4-H public speaking project, showcasing their junior FFA livestock exhibits, or participating in the many open arts, cooking or horticultural competitions, they are able to showcase their work in the state's largest spotlight. These outstanding Ohioans annual exhibit approximately 12,000 junior livestock entries, 12,500 open livestock projects and 14,000 entries in our numerous other competitions.

Our agency is incredibly fortunate to have strong partnerships with many state agencies and community groups. We are thankful to work closely with the Ohio Department of Agriculture, the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, the Ohio Department of Public Safety, the Ohio Department of Transportation, the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, The Ohio State University, the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation and Ohio's diverse agricultural commodity groups. These relationships have helped the Ohio State Fair continue to serve as a premier showcase at which Ohio's businesses and industries can highlight products including agriculture and green initiatives to help foster growth within the state.

One of the primary reasons a Fair is successful is good weather. Good weather, our excellent staff, and the support that we receive from Governor Kasich and the Ohio Legislature help to make the Ohio State Fair one of the country's greatest expositions. We are very proud of our accomplishments of producing a great State Fair and celebrating everything our great state has to offer.

Representatives, thank you for the opportunity to share this information with you today. I am available for your questions.