



Connecting Communities to Resources

March 14, 2019

The Honorable Rob McColley
Chair - Transportation, Commerce and Workforce Committee

Re: Transportation Budget

Dear Senator McColley:

I write today in support of Governor DeWine's proposed \$0.18 per gallon increase in the motor fuel user fee and indexed to inflation. This increase is needed in order to address the \$1 billion budget shortfall the Ohio Department of Transportation is currently facing and to address the transportation infrastructure needs of our local communities.

I am the Executive Director of the Ohio Mid-Eastern Governments Association (OMEGA), a council of governments and local development district that serves ten counties in eastern Appalachian Ohio: Belmont, Carroll, Columbiana, Coshocton, Guernsey, Harrison, Holmes, Jefferson, Muskingum, and Tuscarawas Counties. Our mission is to provide a pathway to enhance community and economic growth in our region. Quality roads and bridges are critical to fostering economic growth and to provide safe, reliable access to employment, education, healthcare, and other daily life activities.

Throughout the 10- county OMEGA region, counties and municipalities often struggle to fund routine maintenance projects, and emergency projects such as slips caused by the recent freeze-thaw cycle and unusually rainy weather can cause long detours and create significant safety concerns when township roads become impassable or when bridges are closed for long periods because of a lack of funding for repairs.

Many local governments in the OMEGA region are currently facing significant clean-up and repair costs as a result of flooding, landslides and road slips. These unexpected events can devastate a local government's already-lean budget, and an increase in funding would allow these entities greater flexibility and stability when addressing emergency repairs.

Eastern Ohio has seen unprecedented growth and investment as a result of Marcellus and Utica Shale drilling and extraction as well as the siting of natural gas power plants and attendant processing facilities for the oil and gas industries; however, this sudden and sustained growth has far outpaced county and municipality budgets' ability to maintain and repair roads subject to an equally unprecedented increase in the amount of traffic – particularly heavy truck traffic.

The investment provided by an increase in the motor fuel user fee is necessary to keep our rural communities competitive as the oil and natural gas industry continues to mature and ancillary

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businesses identify Eastern Ohio as a profitable location. This investment is vital to our rural communities and our ability to attract and retain sustainable, diverse economic development. A healthy, reliable transportation budget enables our communities to expand and improve roadways and provide for strategic planning that positions our communities to embrace economic opportunity and foster subsequent economic growth.

I recently attended a meeting with local officials and representatives from a business that receives raw materials by rail and truck and ships finished product primarily by truck. Primary access to this business, which employs 40 people, is along two gravel county roads. The numerous freeze thaw cycles that have occurred this winter are making it difficult for the county to adequately maintain these access roads. One of the primary customers for this business has threatened to lower the purchase price of the commodity because of the damage caused by the condition of these roads to their trucks. This would have a devastating impact on the profitability of the business. The estimated cost to re-construct and pave these roads to better accommodate the volume of trucks is over \$1.13 million, an almost insurmountable ask for a county with fewer than 37,000 people and for a county engineer with a limited budget, yet this situation is common throughout our region.

OMEGA also serves as a Rural Transportation Planning Organization (RTPO) for eight of the 10 counties in the OMEGA region, and as such supports the creation of a pilot program which allocates \$6 million to the RTPOs to advance critical transportation infrastructure projects in rural Ohio that have been prioritized by the RTPO.

OMEGA's RTPO counties currently have \$55 million in unfunded projects of regional significance, including safety improvements, major construction projects and maintenance and preservation projects. Within the eight county RTPO region, we currently have **11** bridges that are closed and **182** bridges in poor condition. With the myriad of constraints on the budgets for municipalities, counties, and townships, the prospect of completing many transportation infrastructure projects and repairing these bridges is dim without a dedicated funding source.

Despite documented needs over several years, the motor fuel user fee has not increased since 2003. This has created an unacceptable backlog of critical projects in our rural communities, and I appreciate your time and attention to an action which demonstrates a clear and direct benefit to Ohioans – both urban and rural. The time has come to increase the motor fuel user fee and address Ohio's transportation needs.

Sincerely,

OHIO MID EASTERN GOVERNMENTS ASSOCIATION



Jeannette M. Wierzbicki, P.E.

Executive Director