



**Ohio Association of Regional Councils (OARC)  
House Finance Committee  
Proponent Testimony on House Bill 110  
April 15, 2021**

Chairman Oelslager, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Crawley and members of the House Finance Committee: thank you for allowing me to testify today on a specific budget amendment that the Ohio Association of Regional Councils (OARC) is supporting. My name is Jeannette Wierzbicki, the Executive Director of the Ohio Mid-Eastern Governments Association, and I serve as the President of OARC.

OARC members are the state's 24 councils of governments and planning commissions that provide regional planning and delivery of services in the areas of transportation, economic development, air quality, water quality and other sectors across the state. As a whole, we serve over 1,500 local governments and 10 million Ohioans.

As the COVID-19 pandemic reverberated through our communities last year, OARC members saw firsthand the way broadband access and affordability issues were preventing our constituents not just in rural areas, but also in urban areas, from participating fully in modern society. Our individual councils stepped up in their communities to help set up Wi-fi hotspots, map connectivity, conduct research and help local governments submit grants for funding. After seeing confirmation that the broadband needs were so great across our state, OARC recommitted itself as an organization to efforts to connect unserved and underserved areas to high quality, reliable broadband access. In doing so, we realized that our members' existing infrastructure is the perfect medium for coordinating projects in regional areas, channeling funding, and providing the technical and operational support entities might need to put that funding to work. Essentially, we realized we could take on the same planning and coordination functions we already perform in the transportation space in the broadband space.

As such, we are proposing that the state fund and designate Regional Broadband Councils (RBCs) across the state to provide oversight, coordination and technical assistance in our jurisdictions on broadband deployment. While the state currently has a central broadband office, we do not have regional coordinating entities that can help identify local broadband needs and suitable projects, and communicate that information to the state. Consequently, right now, local entities across the state have to individually appeal to BroadbandOhio with project proposals in need of funding, or the division has to do the research to reach out to specific groups of interest. This is not efficient for our communities, nor the incredibly limited staff at BroadbandOhio. The division simply does not have the capacity to do the research and outreach to identify what areas across the entire state have the most need and what specific projects could fill those gaps.

Regional councils can fill this void in a Regional Broadband Council role by leveraging their existing technical expertise, administrative capacity, neutral convener status and proven infrastructure that has already served to channel state and federal resources for years. We already have strong multi-county relationships with local governments and other entities in our regions and thus are the ideal neutral conveners to pull local groups together to come up with a priority list of broadband projects for our areas. As Regional Broadband Councils, we would then submit these lists to BroadbandOhio, which would consequently have shovel-ready projects to choose from as funding becomes available. This is exactly the process regional councils already perform as Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) and Regional Transportation Planning Organizations (RTPOs) for ODOT. RBCs would also serve as a resource to the state as needed, providing boots-on-the-ground value and expertise and acting as a reliable single point of contact in regions on broadband deployment. It is critical that we, as a state, not reinvent the wheel as we try to deploy what is a critical utility to all our unserved and underserved areas. Using regional councils as facilitators would avoid that inefficiency.

It is important to note that, under our proposed amendment, BroadbandOhio would still have full authority to decide what projects to fund and would not be precluded from selecting other projects not on the lists provided by RBCs. This infrastructure is not intended to replace or usurp authority from BroadbandOhio, but rather to support it and provide it with the resources it needs to make informed funding decisions. In addition, it is not our intent that any money distributed would have to flow through RBCs, rather it could go directly to broadband projects. Finally, other qualified entities besides regional councils will also be eligible to be Regional Broadband Councils under our amendment. So long as these entities can confirm they have the required capabilities in their application to DSA, OARC members would in no way be the only entities eligible to serve the Regional Broadband Council role.

Chairman Oelslager and members of the committee, with a Regional Broadband Council model, Ohio will effectively streamline identification of broadband projects and gain a long-term, coordinated and equitable infrastructure for broadband deployment that will allow Ohio to be a more competitive contender for federal dollars. We believe our budget amendment fills a critical void, both by ensuring all relevant local voices are included in the project selection process and by providing regional boots-on-the-ground value to the state on deployment. We urge the committee to support our Regional Broadband Council amendment to establish an efficient and comprehensive approach to delivering broadband statewide.

Thank you for your time and attention and I would welcome any questions you may have.