



Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen Ohio State Legislative Board

A Division of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters Rail Conference

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Ohio House of Representatives – Finance Committee
April 20, 2023 Meeting Testimony of John Esterly

Chainman Edwards, Vice Chair LaRe, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the Finance Committee of the Ohio House of Representatives – thank you for the opportunity to address you today regarding Substitute House Bill 33, the Operating Budget for 2024 – 2025. My name is John Esterly and I am the State Chairman and Legislative Director of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen, a member of the Teamsters Rail Division. My primary objective as Chairman is to promote the safety of my members and of the general public, but as a career railroader I have a vested interest in making Ohio an attractive place to do business and growing our railroad footprint. I am here today to speak out in support of the Ohio Rail Development Commission (ORDC) and to restore their funding, which was reduced in the most recent Substitute Bill.

The ORDC is the most critical agency to ensure the continued growth of rail in Ohio. Their projects touch communities across the state, including many of the communities you represent. Although not unique to the ORDC, I would like to point out that their projects require matching from all partners – whether that be an industry, a railroad, or a combination of partners, each participant needs to contribute financially to the project.

Their work is diverse. Most noticeably, the ORDC works tirelessly to identify railroad crossings that are under protected and unsafe. These crossings are upgraded from crossbucks to flashing lights, from flashing lights to gates, and from gated crossings to full grade separations. This work is immediately beneficial to the communities and increases the safe interaction of train traffic and the general public.

The ORDC also works on growth projects. They partner with businesses to add or improve rail service, allowing those businesses to expand – increasing their revenue and allowing them to create more jobs for Ohioans. ORDC also partners with smaller railroads to improve their track structure, routing, yard operations, and more. Without their help, these railroads would simply not have the resources to grow and expand service to new customers. One of their most notable success stories is the Napoleon, Defiance & Western Railroad (NDW), which with the help of the ORDC went from notoriety as one of the worst sections of rail in the world to the 2023 Short Line Railroad of the Year as honored by Railway Age. With ORDC's help, the NDW has been able to attract new rail customers to the area, again providing good jobs to the community.

Finally ORDC works on larger scale regional planning opportunities. Last year, ORDC began a fact-finding study in the Greater Cincinnati, easily one of Ohio's densest regions. Rail activity from both of Ohio's Class 1 railroads and several smaller short line providers converges from all directions in Cincinnati, which has led to challenges for the railroads and the general public. This study will help to identify key problems in the region, and to improve service and operations in and around CSX's Queensgate Yard and Norfolk Southern's Gest Street Yard.

These projects come from the ORDC's operating budget, which was reduced substantially in the Substitute Bill. Also eliminated from the Substitute Bill is the state-match funding for the Federal grade crossing separation grant. This funding allows Ohio to claim once-in-a-lifetime Federal funding to identify the worst blocked crossings in Ohio and to build over- or under-passes to separate train and vehicular traffic. This will allow vehicular traffic to move freely despite stopped trains, and will allow critical first responder routes to remain open. Some issues with blocked crossings can be solved operationally, but for those that require more aggressive action, this funding will allow Ohio to take action.

The importance of ORDC's work in Ohio's rail industry cannot be overstated. Their funding is amplified through rail and business partners, and by Federal funding – every dollar the Legislature gives to the ORDC grows as it is returned. I ask that their funding – both the operating budget and the grade crossing separation project – be restored so that they are free to continue their work.