



**Ohio Association of Regional Councils
House Government Oversight Committee
Proponent Testimony on HB 257
October 24, 2023**

Chair Peterson, Vice Chair Thomas, Ranking Member Humphrey and esteemed members of the House Government Oversight Committee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify this afternoon. My name is John Hemmings and I serve as the Executive Director of the Ohio Valley Regional Development Commission, the regional council serving 12 counties in Southern Ohio, as well as the Policy Chair of the Ohio Association of Regional Councils. I am here to offer OARC's full support of HB 257.

OARC represents the state's 24 councils of governments and regional planning commissions that provide transportation, economic development, air quality and water quality planning for regional areas across the state. We are your designated Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs), Regional Transportation Planning Organizations (RTPOs), Economic Development Districts (EDDs), Areawide planning agencies and more. Our members serve both rural and urban areas and collectively represent over 1,500 local governments in Ohio.

By nature, regional councils are multi-county entities with public boards comprised of dozens of local leaders spanning multiple jurisdictions. My organization's region consist of twelve (12) counties with a lengthwise geographical span of approximately 131 miles (a 2 hour and 15 minute drive). Other regional council jurisdictions present similarly long commutes of up to an hour or more. Our board members are steadfastly committed to the work of their regional councils, but they are also local elected officials for their own jurisdictions with corresponding commitments and obligations. It is only practical to anticipate a need to accommodate scheduling conflicts, harsh weather and other factors that might prevent a quorum of regional council members from attending any given in-person meeting.

Increased use of remote meeting technology during the pandemic taught us that this technology is easily available and just as effective, if not more so, as in-person forums at facilitating public discussions. During the pandemic, many organizations implemented policies to address virtual involvement in their respective public participation plans. In fact, OARC members saw public participation increase significantly at public meetings when remote options were offered during 2020 and 2021. Federal regulations require MPOs and RTPOs to seek public comment on proposed funding projects, transportation plan updates and other regional planning documents. We welcome public comment on these plans, and increased public involvement often improves our final products. Thus, OARC wholeheartedly supports the authority HB 257 offers our

members to bring their meeting operations into the 21st century, while maintaining transparency and high standards of service for the communities we serve.

Our support noted, we would ask for consideration of the following amendments to the bill to improve clarity and efficiency:

- The bill's prohibition on approving "major nonroutine expenditures" and "significant hiring decisions" at remote meetings is prudent. However, those terms are ambiguous and could mean very different things to differently sized public bodies. A major expenditure for a village, for example, would fall far below what might qualify as major for my regional council. Yet, it is important that there is still a standard set of rules within each public body to govern spending approvals. We respectfully urge consideration of an amendment clarifying that each public body shall define those terms as they relate to that entity's budget and operations in the body's remote meeting policy required to be adopted under the bill. OARC believes establishing written definitions for those terms that are individualized for each public body will ensure accountability, while not confining every governmental entity to vague or one-size-fits-all thresholds.
- The requirement that all votes at remote meetings be taken by roll call would be extremely cumbersome and time-consuming for larger regional council boards. The Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission in Central Ohio, for example, has a 160-person board and can take as many as seven to ten votes at each meeting. OARC would support some reasonable flexibility in the roll call requirement, especially if votes will be unanimous, for certain larger bodies that would allow for objections to still be heard while reducing the time spent on the vote.

Thank you again for your consideration of OARC's perspective on HB 257. We would appreciate consideration of our suggestions and otherwise enthusiastically urge passage of the bill.