

Testimony

By Virgil Strickler, General Manager of the Ohio Expositions Commission

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

FY 2022-2023 Budget Hearing

Chairman Jones, ranking member Troy, and members of the sub-committee. My name is Virgil Strickler, and I am General Manager of the Ohio Expositions Commission. I want to thank you for allowing me this opportunity to speak to you today and inform you of our plans for the future. I am incredibly passionate about the Ohio State Fair and our facility. I've been here for 30 years, and I'm the longest-running general manager in the history of the Ohio State Fair.

Many of you have likely visited our facility at some point in the past, whether for the Ohio State Fair, or for one of the hundreds of events that are held at our year-round event venue, the Ohio Expo Center, such as the Quarter Horse Congress, Home and Garden Show, a high school or college graduation, ice hockey games, concerts, or trade shows.

The Ohio Expositions Commission, operating the Ohio Expo Center & State Fair, is a unique agency charged with a mission: to professionally operate and maintain for public benefit a year-round, service-oriented event facility and produce the annual Ohio State Fair.

And, we do just that. Our 360-acre campus acts much like a convention center, and is home to nearly 200 different events with millions of visitors every year. It's unique, as well, in that many buildings function like blank canvases that our event holders can transform for their various events. For example, the Taft Coliseum can be a horse show arena, an ice hockey rink, or an entertainment venue. With unique offerings and ample square footage, the Ohio Expo Center not only draws in events to help our bottom line and budget, but also to attract events to our great state, generate economic impact for the state and local community, and offer quality events for Ohioans.

Beyond this year-round activity, we take pride in putting on the annual Ohio State Fair. Our state fair is a 12-day showcase of agriculture and celebration of our great state with entertainment, arts, music, big-name concerts, education, and more. We strive to put this event on at a value to Ohioans, offering free parking; free admission for veterans, military, and first responders; and opportunities to purchase discount tickets at a rate that hasn't changed in 20 years. Our goal hasn't been to profit off the Ohio State Fair, but to break even and provide a beneficial event that brings Ohioans together. We continue to make enhancements to fair programming every year, and I hope that you all will join us this summer, July 26 – August 6, as we celebrate our state and recognize exhibitors from each of Ohio's 88 counties.

Year-to-year, we are largely self-sustaining, with revenue from the Fair and year-round events covering our expenses. In the past, we've been very appreciative of the General Assembly's support to help to benefit Ohio youth participating in the Ohio State Fair, with approximately \$350,000 awarded in previous biennia. These funds help to offset, but not cover entirely, costs that allow us pay for trophies and premiums for young livestock exhibitors across the state, and to house and feed the All-Ohio State Fair Band & Youth Choir. These funds have

been instrumental to making an impact on Ohioans, and are something we continue to appreciate each year.

It isn't uncommon to be asked what we do the rest of the year when the fair isn't going on, and the answer is, we're busy. Buildings within our facility are rented almost nonstop, with just a matter of days between buildings are being cleaned from one event and set up for the next. In 2023, the Ohio Expo Center is slated to be occupied 293 days out of 365. For decades, we've been "doing more with less." Whether it is because of the little time between events to make building upgrades, or budget restraints, we are constantly striving to band-aid our aging buildings and infrastructure. We have been incredibly fortunate to benefit from capital funds to support newer buildings, like Kasich Hall and the Buckeye Agriculture Complex. However, when capital requests have been unable to be fulfilled in their entirety, we have done what we can to make necessary repairs and upgrades, meaning that some important projects have been put on the back burner. As such, there are now deferred maintenance concerns that must be addressed. Whether it is leaking underground water lines, aging and inadequately accessible restrooms, outdated HVAC, or buildings that simply aren't suitable for their intended purpose, there are much-needed updates to be addressed.

As you are probably aware, in 2019, Governor DeWine and the General Assembly established the Expo 2050 Task Force to develop a strategic vision for the future of the Expo Center property. To talk about how we are embracing this vision, I would like to introduce Alicia Shoults, an Assistant General Manager of the Ohio Expo Center & State Fair.

ALICIA SHOULTS, CFE, ASSISTANT GENERAL MANAGER

We are fortunate to have recently embarked on a Master Planning process, in partnership with the Expo 2050 Task Force, the Ohio Facilities Construction Commission, and a team of renowned third-party consultants. These experts have local and national experience in the fair, convention, and livestock facility industries, and have collectively created more than 250 facility designs and master plans for fairgrounds across the country. Starting last April, the consultants began working tirelessly to come up with a comprehensive framework that will modernize and enhance the entire site both by making much-needed infrastructure repairs to account for deferred maintenance, as well as the creation of new, modern facilities to best showcase Ohio during the Ohio State Fair and the hundreds of events held at the facility throughout the year. This process has been thorough, with several important layers of research that included:

- Interviews and surveys of **more than 90 stakeholders** from approximately 40 different organizations, including event holders, state agency partners, agricultural commodity groups, the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation, legislative and community partners, youth organizations including 4-H, Expo 2050 Task Force members, Ohio Expositions Commission members and staff, vendors, sponsors, The Ohio State University, Haslam Sports Group and Columbus Crew SC, the Ohio History Connection, the city of Columbus, and safety and security partners.
- Next, an in-depth **facility assessment** of each building, thoroughly reviewing the current structures, utilities, and infrastructure, to identify any necessary renovations, as well as an analysis for a building's suitability for current and future events. They assigned each building a letter grade.
- A review of **existing and prospective event needs**, along with the current frequency that many buildings are in use for set-up, tear-down, or event days. As Virgil mentioned, in 2023, the Ohio Expo Center is currently slated to be occupied for 293 days of the year with event days, official set-up, and tear-down.

- **Benchmarking** research on markets, facilities, and every state fair across the nation, including structure, budget, size, parking availability, and more.

The experts have done the research, and they have presented us with a visionary long-term concept for a transformative project that will establish a cohesive location which will serve as the heart of the Ohio State Fair. This isn't just a construction project – it is a vision for our future and an opportunity. It's a vision for updates that will benefit the year-round event venue to attract and maintain events. It's an opportunity to enhance the Ohio State Fair as a modern venue, showcasing our great state and maintaining a focus on agriculture. It's a chance to reorganize pinch-points that have prohibited ideal flow through the Ohio State Fair. If you've ever visited the Fair before and have felt like you've hit a dead end after the Bricker Building, the design changes will open the flow so it would no longer feel that way. Instead, you will be drawn toward the beautiful 8-acre Natural Resources Park oasis and a brand-new cutting-edge agriculture education facility that takes Ohioans through the farm to fork journey with education and food served by Ohio farmers, incorporating the popular Taste of Ohio Café. This new agricultural building will be a key focal point in the new, open "Town Square" that will bring visitors together and serve as a destination featuring agriculture, hosting additional food and family-friendly resting areas, incorporating children's activities, and a new multi-level showcase of Ohio's story. Located just outside the entrance to the Natural Resources Park, the Town Square will highlight the core Fair foundations of agriculture and natural resources, within a modern, fun, and intentional setting that will be one of the "go-to" destinations of the Fair moving forward.

As I said, it's a long-term vision. It's called Expo 2050 for a reason, and these projects can't happen overnight, or all at once. It's simply impossible to raze the entire facility at once and impact hundreds of events, including the Ohio State Fair, for years. The full plan recommends the demolition of 20 buildings. We recognize that we can't take all the steps at once. As we've worked with the consultants and spoken with our stakeholders, we know that we can work toward the end goal by making steps that are impactful for both the Fair and the facility right away. Some of the steps will be noticeable and will enhance the visitor experience, creating spaces that are efficient for use both during the Fair and the other 353 days a year. Other enhancements are needed infrastructure improvements that will help the grounds accomplish the mission of being sustainable and efficient. While unseen, these critical improvements will be noticeable to both visitors and vendors.

At this time, we propose proceeding with the four main elements that will make the most notable impact as we launch into the future, with a focus centered around the new "Town Square" in the heart of the Fair. What we're sharing today are conceptual drawings, and are not final designs of how these various elements will look and function.

1. An innovative new agricultural education building. We envision this multi-story building to feature on-site classrooms, built-in kitchens, dining space, meeting rooms, and convention space. The key focus of this building during the Ohio State Fair will be a complete farm-to-fork experience, and enhance non-fair events by creating new usable year-round space. This building, in collaboration with Ohio's agricultural commodity groups and the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation, will educate the public about Ohio's largest industry. This building will combine functions of the round Taste of Ohio Café and the beautiful but deficient Agriculture & Horticulture Building.

2. The introduction of a new iconic showcase of Ohio and its story, in partnership with the Ohio History Connection. In the conceptual design, you will see that its shape is architecturally reminiscent of a grain silo to recognize our state's agricultural heritage, and stands approximately three-and-a-half stories high to give you a birds-eye view of the Fair as well as exciting interior features. The building will house several kitchen and dining spaces to create a centerpiece at which regional Ohio food can be featured – showcasing the best of Ohio, and anchor the center of the grounds near a new open “Town Square” area. In a 360-acre facility that currently only has one kitchen, the expansion of kitchens in these two new facilities will allow us to greatly enhance our food offerings.
3. A new, iconic state-of-the-art entry gate to replace the aging lackluster gate between the main parking lots near Historic Crew Stadium and the giant red cardinal on the north side of the grounds. About 80% of fairgoers enter through this gate right now, and an upgrade will make a lasting first impression. The historic gate spelling out OHIO along 11th Avenue will remain as-is.
4. A defined navigational pathway through the grounds, with a different material that will help with overall flow, directing you toward the aforementioned buildings, the new Town Square, and Natural Resources Park.

Of course, the overall project will also include necessary infrastructure updates to help make up for deferred maintenance, including approximately \$57 million in much needed underground utility work.

We are incredibly grateful for the \$50 million in ARPA funds already received through House Bill 45 in December, as well as an existing \$20 million in capital funds previously allocated - \$10 million from EXPO 2050 and another \$10 million from the Ohio Expositions Commission. Today, in conjunction with the Governor's executive budget, we are respectfully requesting an increase of \$190 million in this biennium. The vision we've presented today is based on a budget encompassing both the existing \$70 million and the \$190 million.

Today, you can see that our budget request reflects the transformative project that serves as the launching point for the long-term vision shaped by Governor DeWine, the stakeholders who are critical to the success of the State Fair and the Ohio Expo Center, and the experts we've engaged to help us. These new visionary changes will not only make those much-needed maintenance and infrastructure upgrades, but will also change the overall look and feel of the Ohio State Fair, creating iconic visual anchors and a Town Square to bring Ohioans together.

This vision, which has been developed by experts with experience across the country, has also been validated by third-party industry experts including the head of the International Association of Fairs and Expositions, a renowned state fair CEO, and a retired architect and master planner.

I'd like to turn it back over to our General Manager, Virgil Strickler.

VIRGIL STRICKLER, CFE, GENERAL MANAGER

As I shared earlier, I am incredibly passionate about the Ohio State Fair. And, I'm passionate about bringing Governor DeWine's vision to life and improving the facility to provide for a Fair that is sustainable for generations to come. The plan that we have shared focuses on creating a new space anchored around agriculture and natural resources, and creating a “heart” of the Fair. It works within a budget to maximize the impact in a way that the

largest number of fairgoers can enjoy and experience. These funds would help to greatly enhance our facilities as one of the most unique and versatile event venues in the Midwest.

Representatives, thank you for the opportunity to share this vision for the State Fair and Expo Center with you today, and I am excited to work with you in the coming months and years to achieve this vision. As we move forward, I would be happy to host any of you at our facility to show you more about the proposed plan and take you on a tour. We are available for your questions.