



*Celebrating 250 Years of American Independence*

**FY 2024-25 State Budget Testimony**  
**Todd Kleismit, Executive Director**  
**Hon. Gayle Manning, Chairwoman**  
**Ohio House Finance Subcommittee of Higher Education**  
**February 22, 2023**

Chairwoman Manning and members of the House Finance Subcommittee on Higher Education:

Ohio was in many respects the first truly American state. The first 13 states were, of course, British colonies before American independence. The next three states – Vermont, Kentucky and Tennessee – were carved out of those former British colonies. Ohio sprang first among the states created whole cloth from the young nation’s Northwest Territory. America’s 17<sup>th</sup> state thus became an America original and the template for an aspiring, growing new nation.

Nearly 250 years after declaring its independence, the United States of America and its more than 330 million people stand on the cusp of an important commemoration that has the potential to unite all of us as we reflect, celebrate, and look toward the future. Ohio is today a national leader in the lead up to 2026, not only because of our diverse and rich history, but because Ohio’s governor, General Assembly and the prominent members of our Commission have helped position us for success. We want America 250-Ohio to be loud, colorful, bold, accessible and inclusive. Alongside our national partners, we are working to make this celebration the most inclusive anniversary in the nation’s history.

My name is Todd Kleismit. I am a life-long Ohioan, an Army veteran of Operation Desert Storm and a veteran of the Ohio Statehouse. What an honor it is for me to stand before you today in Ohio’s historic Statehouse building as the executive director of the Ohio Commission for the U.S. Semiquincentennial.

As I reflect on the personal impact of the nation’s bicentennial in 1976, the six year old me would have found it to be mind-blowing to imagine that many years later I would have the opportunity serve my state in this next commemoration. Growing up in Dayton I remember being immersed in history, especially during the nation’s bicentennial. I recall patriotic TV commercials, presidential cards, commemorative quarters, fireworks and the red, white and blue fire hydrants. Through the spirit of the ’76 bicentennial, I fell in love with history, current events, reading and participating in cultural activities like going to museums. I learned a lot

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about my family, community, and myself. This is why, as a leader of this commission, I often tell people that if we're good at what we do, we will inspire the curiosity of our young people today that will far outlive our Commission.

We launched the Commission about a year ago and our charge is defined in section 149.309 of the Ohio Revised Code. The Commission's charge is to "plan, encourage, develop, and coordinate the commemoration of the two hundred fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the United States *and the impact of Ohioans on the nation's past, present, and future.*"

I'd like to take a moment to emphasize the last part of that sentence. Ohio does have multiple touch points to the Revolutionary War – think about the Revolutionary War veterans who founded Marietta or Fort Laurens in Tuscarawas County (Ohio's only Revolutionary War fort) – and Ohio will certainly capitalize on those places and stories that directly relate to the Revolutionary War era. But our "America 250" platform is actually much larger. By putting Ohio in the context of the broader stories that touch on our national narrative, Ohio and Ohioans can spotlight our originality, creativity and innovation that continues to contribute to our nation's story.

Our Commission is modeled largely after the successful Ohio Bicentennial Commission that led Ohio's efforts that culminated in the state's 200<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2003. Like the Ohio Bicentennial Commission, we value inclusion and strive for engagement with all who call Ohio their home. There were many tangible activities (bicentennial barns, historical markers, liberty bells, scholarship and countless events) born out of the state's bicentennial as well as significant intangibles – Ohio pride, community collaboration and extensive media coverage are just a few examples.

I am so proud to do be spearheading this with such a strong group of Commission members that include some of your colleagues from the General Assembly, former governors and a diverse group of people that all bring something special and unique to our work. Our Commission is co-chaired by Doug Preisse and Michael Coleman. I am often asked what the relationship is between the America 250-Ohio Commission and the Ohio History Connection. The relationship is strong, yet independent of one another. The OHC serves as the fiscal agent for America 250-Ohio and employees of the Commission are employees of the nonprofit Ohio History Connection. The Commission itself is an independent state commission made up of a

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diverse group of individuals who work with a small staff of us to steer the strategic direction of our work.

The Commission was engaged in a great deal of outreach last spring and summer, leading toward our first major assignment last fall, the “Recommendations to the People of Ohio”. The ideas came from a variety of individuals across the state. 1) We traveled to each region of the state and conducted 12 in-person “listening sessions.” 2) We also engaged 10 statewide committees with over 100 individuals. 3) We also received other input during phone calls, meetings and emails, some of which were also reflected in our recommendations. We then sorted the ideas based on common themes and selected more than 40 initiatives to highlight in the report you have in your possession today.

The “Recommendations” report is a big reason why Ohio is seen as a national leader among America 250 state commissions. It has firmly established Ohio as a state that is not going to be shy about its place in the national landscape and what we’ve contributed to the United States. The recommendations are a snapshot in time of what we heard and we think it reflects what is do-able and asserts Ohio as a national leader that is definitely leaning into this “America 250” leadership opportunity.

The Commission is now shifting into implementation and forming working groups to achieve many of these initiatives. While we are proud of what we’ve produced so far, we are even more excited about what lies ahead. We often remind our stakeholders that we are not simply waiting for 2026 to happen – it is important that we create a runway now to build momentum toward 2026 and ensure Ohio remains among the states leading the way. Our 88-county engagement strategies will seek to make connections and discoveries that will help Ohioans of all ages and backgrounds see themselves as active citizens in this democracy, not just idle passengers on this journey.

There is a lot of work ahead of us, which will require “all hands on deck” that must include professional staff, Commission members, legislators, volunteers and community leaders everywhere. The General Assembly created our Commission and we consider you and Governor DeWine full partners in this endeavor.

We appreciate the support we’ve received so far from Governor DeWine and the General Assembly. For the current fiscal year, we received \$500,000 in GRF support to get our work

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started. We are pleased that the line item for the Commission in the FY 2024-25 budget stands at \$5.8 million in FY 24 and \$8.1 million in FY 25.

As I said earlier, we have already established Ohio as a national leader in the preparations for America 250. You can see from the “Recommendations to the People of Ohio” that there is no shortage of ambitious plans in the works for these next few years. This will, of course, require some investments of time and dollars. With your continued support, we intend to allocate the largest chunk of the state GRF dollars toward grants in support of America 250 – money that would go toward executing on the ideas in the report and other initiatives.

We anticipate allocating the state GRF support in FY 24-25 in ways to maintain our momentum:

- New grants program for America 250 initiatives (to nonprofits and local governments)
- Programmatic initiatives (spent by the Commission, including marketing/promotions)
- Staffing the Commission (gradually building to 14-16 FTEs)
- Operating expenses (travel, supplies, all other expenses)

We expect about two-thirds of the state GRF to go toward promoting and executing on tangible projects across Ohio.

Here are just a few examples:

- Signature events like the Ohio Film Festival and aviation-themed events
- Commemorative activities such as the identification of Revolutionary War veteran grave sites, murals and local events at county courthouses
- Supplemental educational resources with partners from the Ohio Department of Education and cultural institutions
- Tourism trails that capitalize on national themes across the state

There are plenty more initiatives in the booklet and even additional ideas that we learn about regularly. There is a lot to do and we are rolling up our sleeves now to make the most of this unique window of opportunity we have between now and 2026. I mentioned that we are building on the model of the Ohio Bicentennial Commission, which hired dozens of people throughout the duration of the Commission’s lead up and had as many as 16 employees at any one time.

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Like I said, it will be an “all hands on deck” effort. Each county will need its own engagement strategy. This is definitely not a one-size-fits-all proposition. With the help of the General Assembly to promote and talk to local leaders in your districts, many more initiatives can be realized that still lie in our future.

In Representative Manning’s Lorain County district, Lake Erie will surely have a prominent role in upcoming plans. In Representative Cross’s district, what better place than Findlay – “Flag City USA” – to take up the mantle of America 250! In Representative Young’s Summit County district, innovation, canals and rubber quickly come to mind. In Representative Jarrells’ Columbus district right here, the Lincoln Theatre, nearly 100 years old, is a landmark that gave voice to numerous successful Black artists and entertainers during a time of segregation and discrimination. In Representative Blackshear’s Dayton-area district, we find the Birthplace of Aviation, Wright Patterson AFB, innovation and manufacturing. About 100 years ago, my hometown of Dayton had more patents per capita than any other American city.

As you can see, Ohio has much to celebrate and we have a strong foundation on which to build. I sometimes refer to Ohio as a content-rich environment for anyone interested in history and learning how Ohio is in so many ways a microcosm of America. In closing, I wish to emphasize to you that our work will not simply be an exercise in looking back, but to also looking to the future. What can we do these next few years that will have lasting impact far beyond 2026? This will depend on all of us coming together to explore the possibilities. We’re excited. We hope you are, too.

On behalf of our Commission, we invite you to join us on this journey toward July 4, 2026. As Governor DeWine has been emphasizing lately, ***this is Ohio’s time***. We agree. Thank you for the opportunity to be with you today. I thank each of you for your public service to our state. I look forward to hearing what questions you have and how we can collaborate moving forward.

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