



**Ohio Association of Regional Councils
Senate Government Oversight Committee
Proponent Testimony on HB 257
June 26, 2024**

Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Antani, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson and esteemed members of the Senate 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 consists 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, even if just up to an hour. 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 of governmental bodies. 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.

Thank you again for your consideration of OARC's perspective on HB 257. We enthusiastically urge passage of the bill by this committee and the full Senate.