



MID-OHIO REGIONAL
MORPC
PLANNING COMMISSION

111 Liberty Street, Suite 100
Columbus, Ohio 43215
morpc.org

T. 614. 228.2663
TTY. 1.800.750.0750
info@morpc.org

**State Transportation Budget (FY 2024-2025)
Interested Party Testimony
March 7, 2023
Senate Transportation Committee
William Murdock, Executive Director, Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission**

Chair Kunze, Vice Chair Reineke, Ranking Member Antonio, and members of the Senate Transportation Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the transportation budget bill for fiscal years 2024 and 2025. My name is William Murdock, I am the Executive Director of the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC).

We are Central Ohio's regional council representing more than 80 local governments and partner organizations across a 15-county region. Our communities span urban, suburban, and rural areas, comprising a broad cross-section of Ohioans. In addition to sharing their needs with state leaders, we also provide a variety of programs and services related to transportation, land use, data, sustainability, and economic development.

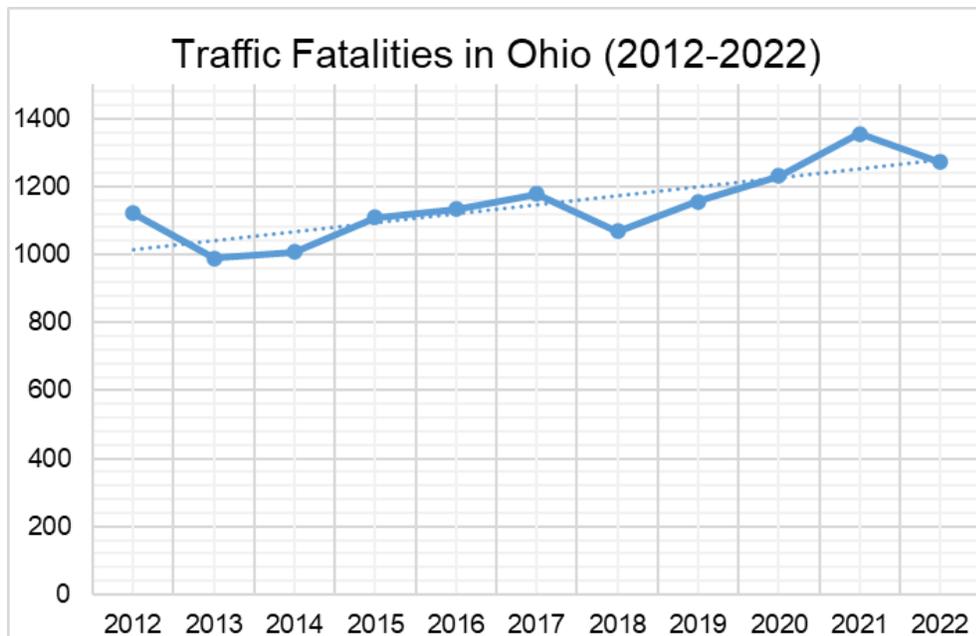
MORPC plays a pivotal role in transportation planning for our region. As a Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), we are specially designated by the United States Department of Transportation (USDOT) to carry out transportation planning for the Columbus urbanized area. We also house the Central Ohio Rural Planning Organization (CORPO), which is a designated Regional Transportation Planning Organization (RTPO) as recognized by the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT). Further, we work directly with our communities to help the access transportation and infrastructure programs and funding from the Ohio Public Works Commission, Ohio Department of Development, and others.

Transportation is a large part of what we do at MORPC. Whether it's planning improvements to transit systems, ensuring our residents have multi-modal transportation options, or making our roadways safer for everyone, we work hand-in-hand with our state and federal partners every day to enhance mobility in Central Ohio.

With this in mind, I come before you today pleased and encouraged by the bill, and we urge this body to maintain or expand the significant investments in three key areas: roadway safety, public transit, and trails.

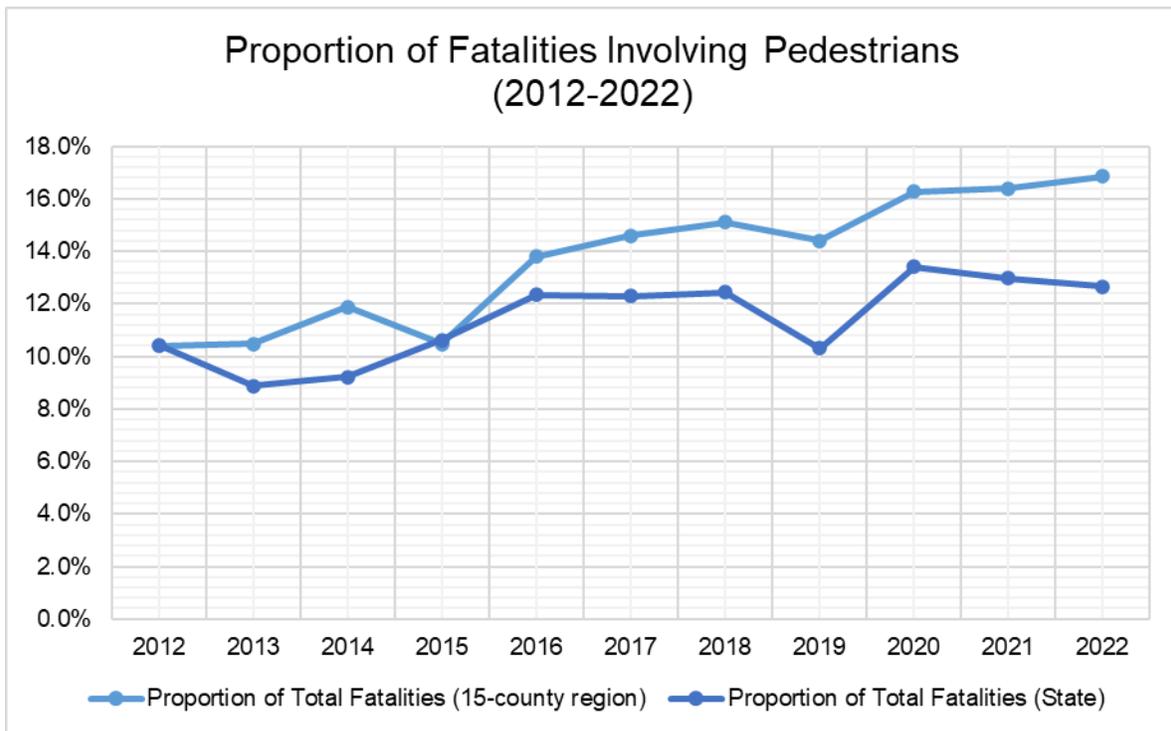
Safe Streets and Roadways

Recent years have seen an alarming uptick in traffic fatalities, both for drivers and pedestrians. As we noticed during the peaks of the pandemic, driver behavior changed, speeds increased, and crashes became both more common and severe. At the end of this document is a series of maps demonstrating the scope and geographic diversity of this problem across our region. In Central Ohio alone, 1,500 people were either killed or seriously injured in traffic crashes in 2021. From 2017 to 2021, over 1,100 people died. It's not population growth along as this is increasing per capita here and as shown in the graph below, the trend has been increasing statewide too. While 2013 was Ohio's safest year on record, 2021 was the deadliest we have seen. Between 2012 and 2021, 53 of Ohio's 88 counties saw fatal crashes per capita trend upward.



Sadly, we have also seen a sharp rise in vulnerable road user fatalities in recent years. Pedestrian deaths more than doubled between 2013 and 2021, and now make up 17 percent of all fatalities on Central Ohio roadways. Bicyclist deaths increased by 50 percent in the same period.

We can and must do better. Motor vehicle crashes are preventable. While individual driver behavior is a significant factor, there are steps we can take at the state and local level to calm traffic and encourage more careful behaviors on the road. Simple structural changes like diagonal parking in downtowns, sidewalk bumpouts at intersections, dedicated bike lanes, traffic circles, and high-visibility crosswalks can have significant impacts on speed and safety.



Highway Safety Funding

State and federal funding have been a crucial tool for local governments to make these kinds of improvements, and thankfully, the Governor and our partners at ODOT prioritized safety in this budget. Already, Ohio is a national leader in traffic safety investments. The Governor's proposal continued that trend in several ways. First, it would set aside \$181 million per fiscal year in safety programs – primarily through federal dollars. This represents a nearly 10 percent increase over the prior fiscal year. This includes programs like the Highway Safety Improvement Program, which directs funds to upgrade Ohio's most dangerous thoroughways and intersections in many of the aforementioned ways. The blue book also noted that over \$450 million will be invested in intersection improvements in total.

Systemic Safety Program and Pedestrian Safety

Additionally, the Governor's proposal included a \$50 million Systemic Safety Program to level off dangerous slopes, install rumble strips on center lines and edge lines, widen shoulders on high-speed rural roads, install high-visibility crossings and signals, and improve lighting. As pedestrian-involved crashes most often occur at night and on roadway locations where higher speeds occur, these improvements are crucial to reduce the alarming increase in pedestrian deaths here in Central Ohio.

We hope that through the work of this committee and the Department of Transportation, funding will continue to be made available to local governments for pedestrian safety improvements. Far more must be done to protect vulnerable road users in urban, suburban,

and rural settings alike, and we urge you to ensure that funds continue to be made available to local governments for these purposes.

Improvements to Distracted Driving Law

We are grateful for this body's recent changes to Ohio's distracted driving law in the previous General Assembly. The new law will provide more tools to deter distracted driving, saving lives and making our roads safer for everyone. However, we remain concerned that the language passed is not sufficient. We recommend that the General Assembly move to eliminate the exceptions to the law that allow motorists to hold devices to their ears while driving, and that which allows device use while stopped at a red light. Furthermore, a requirement to report the race of motorists ticketed for distracted driving is an improvement, but we recommend officers be required to report on any individual they pull over for distracted driving to better detect disparities in enforcement. This has been successfully implemented in states like Virginia without complication.

Investing in Rural Communities

In the executive version of the budget, the Governor clearly prioritized elevating communities all over our state. One very effective tool for rural transportation development in Ohio is an RTPO. RTPOs develop transportation plans to better prepare rural and Appalachian communities for both safety and economic growth. MORPC works closely with seven Central Ohio counties on transportation planning services for rural areas throughout the region. Staffed by MORPC and guided by both the CORPO committee and county-level subcommittees, CORPO also runs a Transportation Improvement Program (TIP).

Unfortunately, RTPOs are a vastly underfunded tool. In our first project cycle in Central Ohio alone, our RTPO was over \$2 million short of meeting demand. The statewide appropriation for this program was just \$1.4 million in FY 2023. To correct this imbalance, we strongly support the \$10 million per fiscal year appropriation added in the House, and we further support our partners at the Ohio Rural Development Alliance in their efforts to expand the program. This investment would allow RTPOs to be a more resourceful tool to communities that need the assistance and would enable our counterparts across the state to better serve rural communities.

Rail

A safe, efficient, and robust rail system is a key part of any regional transportation strategy. In the proposed operating budget, a \$125 million state match is set aside for a federal rail crossing safety program, as well as \$10 million for rail development. These railroad grade crossing improvements will make our transportation systems and surrounding communities safer and more prepared for economic growth.

We also applaud the House for prioritizing rail safety in their version of the bill. Given the recent derailments in East Palestine and Springfield and growing public concern, we at

MORPC and our counterpart regional councils across the state are uniquely positioned to convene and engage local governments and communities due to our critical role in transportation and infrastructure planning at the regional level. As this body and other decision-makers contemplate next steps, we encourage you to consider engaging regional councils as a resource to disseminate information, gather community feedback, or task us with planning and risk assessment.

Finally, MORPC also supports Governor DeWine's decision to apply for the first phase of funding to study expanding passenger rail service in Ohio. We thank the Governor for his leadership in starting this critical process for the Cleveland- Columbus-Cincinnati-Dayton (3CD) corridor and the Cleveland- Toledo-Detroit corridor, which helps not only urban areas, but is critical to provide new and better service to rural Ohio. Remaining competitive on a national level will require us to invest significantly in our workforce's needs. Diverse transportation options are a core part of a successful workforce strategy, and we look forward to our work with the Ohio Rail Development Commission in competing for this investment that will better connect our rural, suburban, and urban communities to resources, local economies, and each other.

Disadvantaged Communities

In addition to each of the safety issues we have discussed, we also must be cognizant of the disparate impacts that exist in disadvantaged communities across our state. Every community needs tools to provide safe streets for their residents, and sadly, some have historically been left behind. According to a national study conducted in 2021 by Smart Growth America, pedestrian fatalities occur twice as often in low-income neighborhoods than middle-income neighborhoods, and three times more often than in high-income neighborhoods. Additionally, Black pedestrians are killed at a rate 82 percent higher than non-Hispanic white residents. According to the CDC, seniors and children are also disproportionately killed.

At MORPC, we want to ensure that all our residents – regardless of income, race, age, or other demographic factors – have access to a variety of safe transportation options wherever they call home. For this reason, we are grateful for ODOT revising its scoring process to give more funds to communities with high levels of poverty and eliminating local match requirements for such communities. This change will take us one step closer to our goal of providing a multimodal transportation system that is safe for everyone.

Transit

With massive new investments and opportunities like Intel, Honda, and Amazon on the horizon, transportation needs will grow significantly also. By our own estimates, we believe Central Ohio will be home to 3.15 million residents by 2050. At MORPC, we want to ensure our region grows better as we get bigger. Currently, more than 80 percent of Central Ohioans enjoy a commute time of less than 35 minutes. To continue offering this convenience, we must be strategic as we enter this new chapter – ensuring that housing,

employment, and transit are developed in unison. This kind of synergy will not only preserve efficient transportation, but improve sustainability, safety, and employment access for all our residents.

In the last transportation budget, the Ohio General Assembly moved to fund public transportation at historic levels, and we were pleased to see this bill maintain \$37 million per year in GRF funding to complement gradual increases in federal funds. For Fiscal Year 2025, that will total \$100 million – a significant improvement as transportation needs continue to evolve. The House also added a new \$15 million Workforce Mobility Partnership Program to help regional transit authorities get workers in underserved areas to good-paying jobs using public transit.

We support these increases and are encouraged by this progress, and there is still more to be done to meet future public transit demand. As we continue to champion growth and job creation across our state, we must recognize and meet the needs our workers and employers face.

Trails

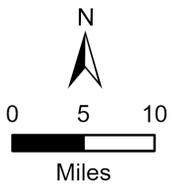
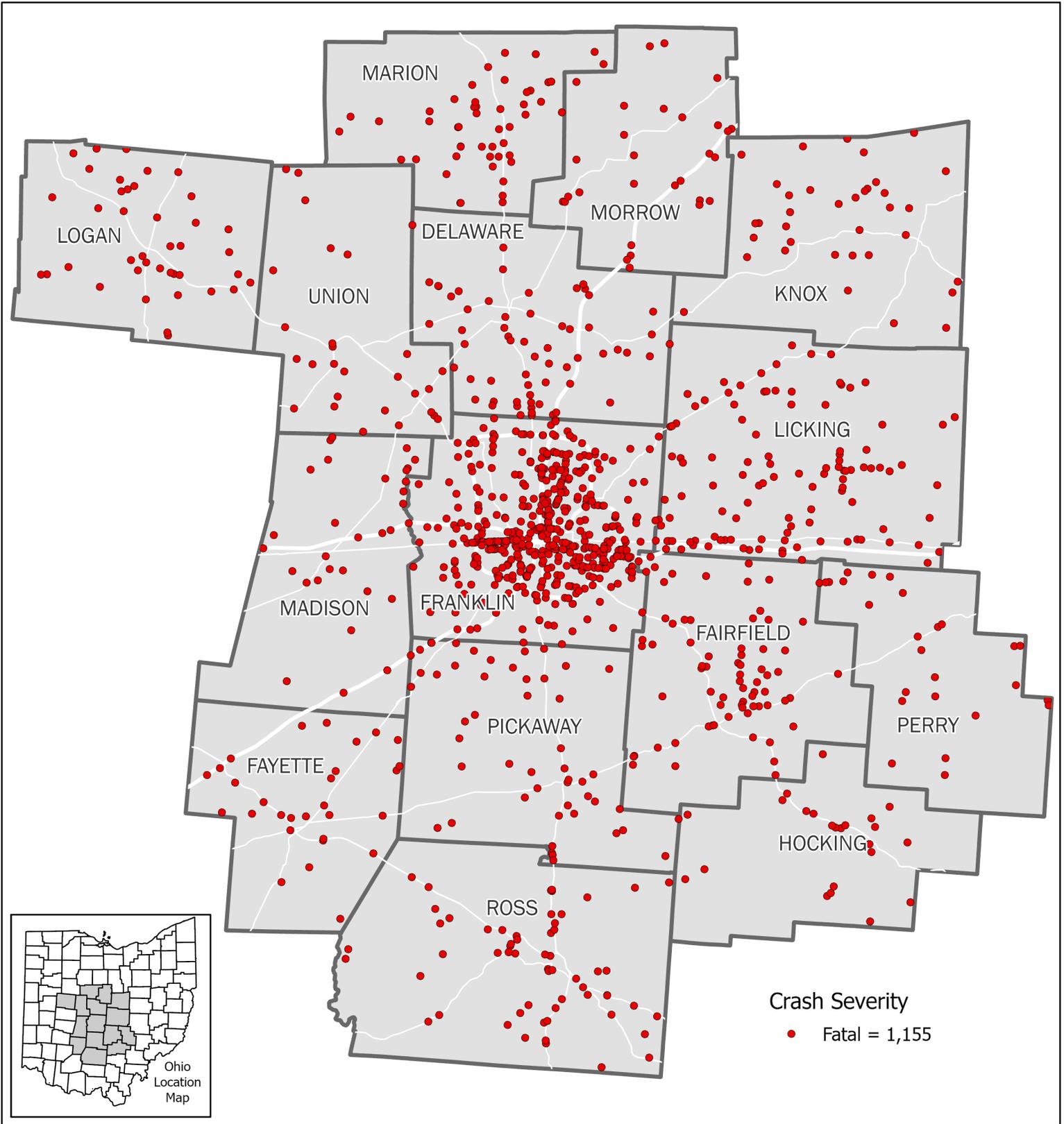
One more effective tool we have to combat congestion, improve pedestrian and cyclist safety, and promote overall health is trail and greenway development. In Central Ohio we have Central Ohio Greenways (COG), which is a trail network of national significance spanning 230+ miles, connecting the region to other parts of the state and country. These trails are traveled more than 12 million miles annually providing economic, quality of life, and health benefits to the community. As part of the funding we receive as an MPO, the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) provides resources to improve transportation options for non-motorists. The Governor's proposal would give MPOs across the state an additional \$53 million for local transportation planning and improvement projects, including for the Transportation Alternatives Program.

The Safe Routes to School program also provides needed funding for active transportation routes around schools, providing students with safe and convenient trails or street crossings in their neighborhoods. We are supportive of the increases afforded to this program in the Governor's proposal and urge continued support.

Chair Kunze, Vice Chair Reineke, Ranking Member Antonio, and members of the Senate Transportation Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony. I am happy to answer any questions you may have and welcome any opportunity to collaborate with you to make Ohio's roadways, trails, and transit safer and better for its people.

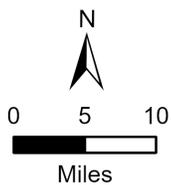
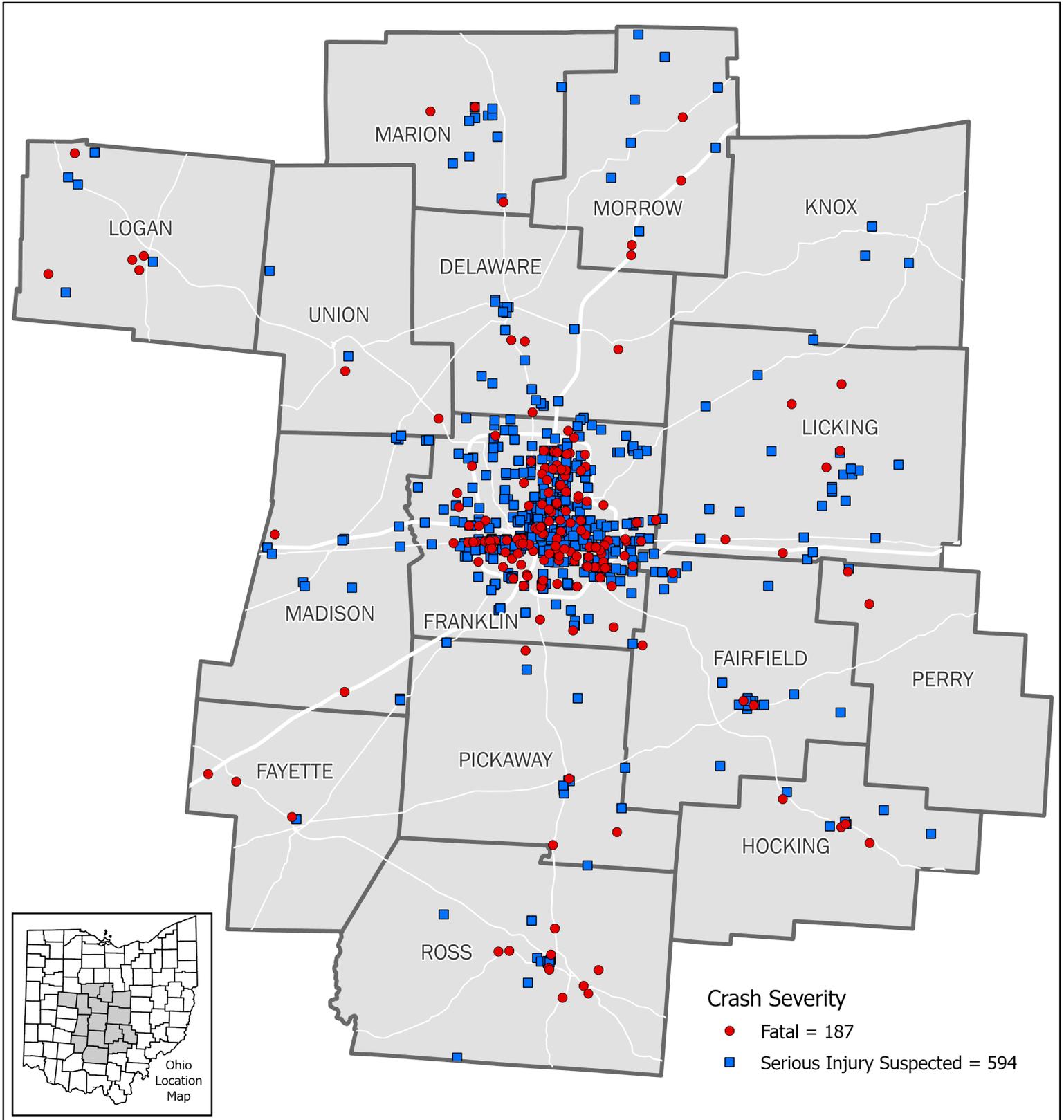
Central Ohio Crash Data 2017-2021

ODOT data from 2017 to 2021



Central Ohio Data for Crashes Involving Pedestrians, 2017-2021

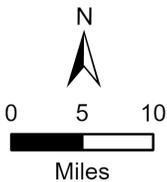
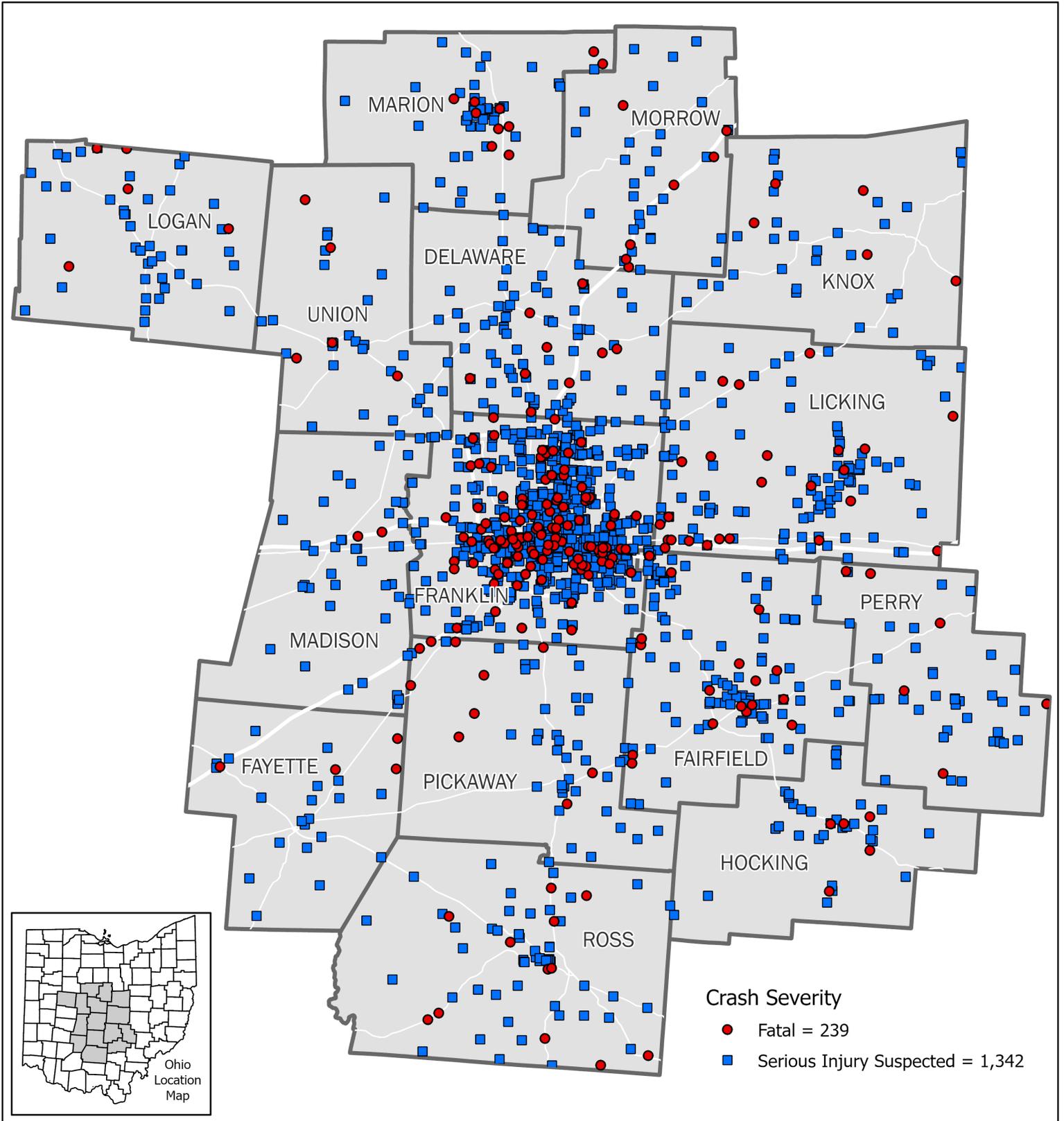
ODOT data from 2017-2021



The information shown on this map is compiled from various sources made available to us which we believe to be reliable.
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Central Ohio Crash Data 2021

ODOT data from January 1, 2021 to September 1, 2021



Central Ohio Data for Crashes Involving Pedestrians, 2021

ODOT data from January 1, 2021 to September 1, 2021

