

April 28, 2021

Chris Bauserman, PE, PS, Delaware County Engineer

To the Joint Committee on Force Accounts:

I am the County Engineer in Delaware County, where we are experiencing very rapid urbanizing growth. Most of our population increase is in our southern half, while the northern part of our remains largely rural and agricultural. Our county is a microcosm of the diverse land development patterns around our State. The challenges from each area can be different at times, but they both share a common need for a safe and efficient transportation system that impacts the economic health of our businesses and the quality of life of our residents. The 2020 Census in Delaware County is expected to show our population over 215,000 people, twice what it was in 2003 when Ohio's force account limits were last adjusted.

Ohio's County Engineers collectively are requesting increases to the force account limits to account for construction cost inflation since 2003. The National Highway Construction Cost Index (chart attached) shows a 96% increase from 2003 to 2019. Outdated force account limits coupled with ongoing construction price increases have resulted in unreasonable and unnecessary limits on the amount of work counties can perform with their existing work force utilizing their existing fleet of equipment.

I was the county engineer in 2003 when the force accounts limits were last adjusted. I distinctly remember the predictions that increasing the limits would result in counties hiring more people and buying more equipment. That did not happen in my county and it didn't happen statewide. I have fewer employees in my highway department now, than I had in 2003. I have less construction equipment in my fleet today than I had in 2003. The same is true statewide. Counties do not have an interest in competing with the private sector. We do have an interest in making the most cost effective use of our existing resources.

County Highway Departments are funded primarily by a share of the state fuel tax, motor vehicle registration fees and state and federal grants. County Highway budgets are fixed. They are constrained by their revenue sources. Limiting the availability of a county to use their own existing work force and equipment is an inefficient use of those resources.

Continuing to suppress force account limits does not create new contracting opportunities for the private sector. Last year Delaware County awarded \$35M in road and bridge construction contracts to private contractors. That number was limited by the available funding sources. There were certainly more projects that we needed to build. Force account projects that could have been built in 2003 (but now can't due to inflationary constraints) don't get added to that \$35M program. They get deferred to a later year or they displace another project that would have been otherwise awarded to a private contractor. Limiting county force account projects does not create a corresponding increase in funds available for private contracts.

Private sector contractors are some of our most valuable partners. We couldn't make the kind of improvements demanded by our growing community without them. County Engineers are charged with the "Construction, reconstruction, improvement, maintenance, and repair of all bridges and highways within the engineer's county, under the jurisdiction of the board of county commissioners" (ORC 5543.01). In doing so, we employ a work force and maintain a fleet to provide the basic services related to owning and maintaining a local highway system. We are not asking to expand our role, increase our staff or expand our fleet of equipment. We are simply asking for the latitude to make decisions about the use of these existing resources in a way that maximizes the efficiency of taxpayer dollars. I strongly support increases in the county force account limits that have been eroded by construction cost inflation over the last 18 years.

Respectfully Submitted,

Chris Bauserman, PE, PS
 Delaware County Engineer

