



Celebrating 250 Years of American Independence

**FY 2024-25 State Budget (Sub HB 33) Public Testimony
Todd Kleismit, Executive Director**

**Hon. Jerry Cirino, Chairman
Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee
May 9, 2023**

Chairman Cirino, Vice Chair Rulli, Ranking Member Smith and members of the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee:

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. Ohio, America’s 17th state, thus became an American 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 to serve my state in this next commemoration. Growing up in Ohio 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

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events, reading and participating in cultural activities like going to museums. I learned a lot about my community, family members 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 200th 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 B. 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. The Governor's introduced version of the budget in the FY 2024-25 budget was \$5.8 million in FY 24 and \$8.1 million in FY 25. That's where we hope to end up on June 30.

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 portion 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, primarily at the local level throughout the 88 counties.

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 12-16 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 and Ohio-centric themes

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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The success of America 250-Ohio and putting on what could be hundreds of events will be driven through partnership and a coordinated effort. In addition to paid staff and commissioners, we will need each county to help develop its own engagement strategy to fit their particular needs. This is definitely not a one-size-fits-all proposition.

There is a wealth of relevant history in each of your districts that should be showcased as part of our work these next few years. We could start with Independence, Ohio, in Senator Cirinio's district. Think about the multitude of history, manufacturing and innovation that has happened in and around Cleveland and Youngstown. One project that has great potential is theming U.S. Route 250 with America 250. We're encouraging the communities along that corridor to collaborate in ways they have not before. U.S. Route 250 connects two of Ohio's greatest assets – Lake Erie and the Ohio River. It stretches from Sandusky just outside of Senator Reineke's district through other places with interesting history (Milan, Norwalk, Ashland, Wooster, New Philadelphia, Dennison and Cadiz). Senator Reineke, of course, has presidential landmarks in his district – the Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Library & Museum in Fremont and the Warren G. Harding Presidential Sites in Marion.

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 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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