

Bill Johnson
President, Youngstown State University
Senate Capital Budget Testimony
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Chairman Cirino, Vice Chairman Rulli, Ranking Member Ingram, Senator Reineke and Senator Reynolds, thank you for the opportunity to be with you today. You know, this feels a little funny to me...because this is my FIRST time on this side of the table.

After serving 13 years in Congress, I'm very familiar with and appreciative of the work you all do. Because we all know that serving our constituents isn't as glamorous as some may think.

But it's important work all the same.

I'm also very aware that I'm the last university president you're hearing from, so I won't waste your time.

But let me start by introducing the members of our Youngstown State team that are here with me today...

Mr. Chuck George, BOT
Dr. Mike Sherman, VP of Inst. Eff.
Mr. Neal McNally, CFO
Ms. Sarah Keeler, GA
Ms. Maria Bova

Today, I'm very grateful for this chance to share with you the Youngstown State University story...especially the impact YSU has throughout our region.

From its founding in 1908 as a local law school associated with the YMCA, through its transformations and name changes over the years to becoming one of Ohio's public institutions of higher learning in 1967, YSU has been **THE** anchor institution of higher learning for the Mahoning Valley.

But, today, we don't just serve the Mahoning Valley...we currently offer 11 associate degree programs, 68 undergraduate programs, 44 masters programs, and 5 doctoral programs across 7 colleges that serve a very large region covering much of Eastern and Northeastern Ohio, Western Pennsylvania, and beyond.

And, as you'll see shortly, we're undergoing a major expansion to fill a void created by the Eastern Gateway Community College situation and to meet the growing, ever-changing workforce needs of our region.

When I was offered the opportunity to become the President of YSU, I was tremendously humbled...and I remain so.

The city of Youngstown in general - and YSU specifically - play such a huge role in the success of our region. And after spending more than a decade representing most parts of our region at the federal level, I was excited to have the opportunity to lead this Northeast Ohio treasure.

Plus, I've been personally donating to the success of YSU for some time in a different way... my son, Nathan, is a sophomore on YSU's swim team, and my nephew, Jack, is a junior and plays baseball for YSU. So, I have even more reasons than simply **"it's my job"** to be on the campus.

I've been asked repeatedly by both residents of the region and those that attend and work at YSU...**"what are your goals?"**

I actually began thinking about how to answer that question during the interview process, long before I arrived on campus. But I've thought about it a lot more over my first few months in the job.

One of my goals is to more seamlessly integrate YSU with the city of Youngstown, the Mahoning Valley, our region, and the growing/thriving business and industry community across that vast spectrum.

We've all heard about population decline and the "brain drain" in our state. And YSU's impact on our students, faculty, staff, and our community at large is critical to our collective efforts to prepare our students for today's challenging workforce environment in a way that keeps them living and working in Youngstown and the Northeast Ohio region. For YSU to meet this goal, there are parts of our campus that are absolutely necessary to keep the University running at its highest potential. One such integral part is the Student and Community Center.

We've all heard about the pressures of declining university enrollment, not just here in Ohio, but across the nation. To attract students from across our region, state, and beyond we must ensure a positive campus experience for our students. Our Student and Community Center was built in 1964, is 60 years old, has had only minor updates, and has considerable deferred maintenance outstanding.

Therefore, an essential and extensive renovation of this facility is the main thrust of our capital request this year. But I'll talk about that more in a moment.

First, Senator Cirino, you requested specific information regarding our staffing and spending, which we supplied in advance. But let me highlight a few items.

Despite the extremely difficult inflationary environment of the past few years, we've kept Youngstown State's annual costs and employee headcount fairly flat, and in some cases, we've even reduced costs.

For example, our staffing levels, between 2019 and 2023, have decreased by 18 percent.

But you'll note from the data we've provided, YSU has consistently dedicated less than one half of one percent of our budget to DEI and DEI related initiatives.

In fact, when I arrived at YSU in January of this year, there was a vacancy in the DEI Director position. I gave that a lot of thought.

And after consulting with our leadership team, students, our Board of Trustees, and others, we decided we'd try something new...that we would refocus our efforts on something more empowering, more engaging, and more reflective of our Penguin family...something that would benefit everyone at YSU, something that would unite us rather than divide us.

Some questioned that decision...but today, we're in the process of transforming our former DEI office into a program that cultivates a campus culture where everyone – students, faculty, and staff - is respected, valued, supported, included, and heard. We're making sure that every student that comes to YSU feels at home, feels respected, feels included in campus life, feels valued, and that at the end of the day “KNOWS Y” ...knows why YSU is such a special place.

At YSU, we're promoting a healthy campus culture that acknowledges that, yes...America is a diverse society, and that our constitution guarantees every citizen the equal opportunity to pursue their version of the American Dream on their terms. But we're also a culture built around the values of trust, dignity, respect, integrity, service before self, and excellence. And this new direction is being enthusiastically embraced.

But let me now shift to our Student and Community Center project...which I'll refer to as the “Student Center” moving forward. It's a huge part of YSU and the city of Youngstown.

There have been very few modifications since the facility was first built. It was expanded twice, in 1971 and 1979, and an adjacent recreation center was built in 2004.

This Student Center is home away from home for approximately 11,000 students and 1,600 faculty & staff. It is essentially the epicenter of campus life, and basically sets the mood for the campus experience. Our students, faculty, and staff rely on the Student Center for access to resources, study space, meeting and socializing spaces, and engaging in various campus activities.

In addition, we have a significant commuter student population at YSU who need a place to camp out during the school day, so they don't have to go search for some place off campus to meet or study...or worse yet, go home.

It's **THE** place to grab lunch or a snack from any of our various food vendors, have a cup of coffee with or meet new friends, attend a meeting with colleagues, or serve as a gathering place for student groups, new student recruits, parents, guests, and others. It's essentially the family room of YSU where we gather to learn from, collaborate with, and support each other.

But the Student Center serves far more than just our YSU students, faculty and staff. It also serves as a resource for regional K-12 events and various community activities such as cultural events, business gatherings, music/theater/performing arts presentations, and student training & education.

In fact, for many outsiders, the Student Center is their first glimpse of YSU campus life. And we all know that first impressions are lasting impressions.

Now, I'm sure you've all heard about the problems at Eastern Gateway Community College and that it will not enroll any more students beyond the Spring term. This has created a tremendous void in educational opportunities for thousands of students throughout our region.

As a result, in December 2023, YSU, in collaboration with the Governor, the Ohio Department of Higher Education and the Higher Learning Commission, began a process to add new programs to meet both the needs of these affected students as well as the dynamic and ever-changing workforce needs of this region, including the Upper Ohio Valley.

We're happy to welcome any of these students that choose YSU as Penguins - from those seeking college credit plus courses in high school – in fact, we've added 5 new school districts and we're looking at 2 more - to those pursuing credentials, certificates, or associate degrees to get the jobs they want **today**.

We've made tremendous progress in standing up some 60+ new programs – many of them in time for the summer term and even more by the start of the fall term - to meet the growing

workforce needs of our region...and this is resulting in increased enrollment at YSU. More students mean we'll have an even greater need for our Student Center.

So, I can't think of a better time or a better reason to pursue these much-needed renovations and updates to the Student Center.

Right now, it provides the space and resources for over 160 student organizations. Without it, these students would not have a suitable place to gather...because the rest of our campus is full of academic classes.

When I welcome new students to YSU for the first time, I ask them to embrace three goals: Develop a plan and work hard to complete their degrees; Develop a good idea and plan about what they want to do after graduation, and Don't amass a huge financial debt in the process.

I tell them we have resources to help them with each of those goals...but the students have to buy in. And they do!

In fact, engagement in these student organizations such as club sports, Greek life, student government, and many others not only positively impacts the student experience, but it also has a significant impact on graduation rates.

In a recent study of students who started YSU in the Fall of 2017, the graduation rate for students not involved in a registered student organization was 41 percent, while the graduation rate for students who joined one or more student organization was 62 percent.

So, the social and cultural advantages these student organizations provide are important...they provide not only a sense of belonging, opportunities for service, lessons promoting life-long learning, and development of leadership skills, but also opportunities for students to work with our local business community and regional and national organizations. Such engagement on campus often creates a pathway for students to remain engaged within the community post-graduation, and many will stay in our region to pursue their careers, start their families, and contribute to our economy.

From a community standpoint, the Student Center provides opportunities to grow regional partnerships with businesses and industries and fosters strong relationships among regional economic development agencies.

Just a couple of weeks ago, Governor DeWine announced the creation of the Lake to River Foundation...the 7th economic development region under the JobsOhio umbrella...and he cited YSU's partnership as one of the major reasons why he's so optimistic about our region's future.

Historically, the Student Center annually hosts around 5,500 events, with hundreds of thousands of attendees. This foot traffic is essential to keeping our region's business communities involved with our campus, and provides them a direct connection to our students...it helps businesses articulate their workforce needs, and it helps our students understand the job opportunities that await them after graduation. This emphasizes the importance of workforce development at YSU.

Now, I've mentioned workforce several times. At YSU, we're focused on that. I hear it from every business owner I meet...**"We can't find people who have the skills and desire to work! What are we going to do?"**

So, at YSU we've seamlessly integrated the various workforce, education, and innovation programs into our STEM and Honors colleges...to create a more synchronous path between our YSU academic centers of excellence who **train and educate** our workforce...and the businesses, industries, employers, and school systems throughout our region who **need** that workforce.

As a result, we're now offering more credentialing services, certificates, Associate Degrees, workforce strategies, industry training, and apprentice partnerships needed for **today's** jobs.

For example, through our summer camps and workshops for young and aspiring students, YSU's Excellence Training Center continues to positively impact career opportunities for the next generation.

So, we have great momentum...but to sustain it, we need your help.

And let me start making that case by sharing with you a perspective I've already begun speaking to some of our state legislators about.

In 1997 the Ohio Supreme Court's DeRolph decision shifted a greater share of capital funds to K-12 learning, which caused some decline in higher ed funding.

Now, I get why that was important. Remember, I represented a very rural Appalachian district for well over a decade.

So, as a public-school product myself, as are all my children and grandchildren, I know full well the value proposition of an effective, safe, environmentally, and esthetically comfortable school for our children.

It enhances learning. And that's especially important in rural areas where the scourge of drug addiction and other family problems have caused schools to become a sanctuary for thousands of children who suffer from so many dysfunctions at home. So, I'm sure there were very good reasons for this decision.

But it can't stay that way forever.

We must remember that Ohio's workforce needs span the full spectrum of education...from Kindergarten through Doctoral degrees.

Yes, we need an education system that provides a robust workforce capable of doing, building, and making things **TODAY**...the trades if you will. But the great state of Ohio also has a legacy to protect...a legacy of providing the great visionaries, dreamers, creators, engineers, medical professionals, and problem solvers who will change the world in the future.

Just consider our state's contributions during the Civil War, where several prominent Ohioans were in Lincoln's inner circle to help prosecute, win, and recover from that great conflict.

But then in the century after the war, from 1865-1975, Ohio's innovative, visionary mindset went into overdrive...

the invention of the airplane by two bicycle repairmen in Dayton, the Wright Brothers;

the invention of the light bulb by Thomas Edison, an Ohioan;

space travel pioneers like John Glenn and Neil Armstrong, both Ohioans;

and let's not forget the first oil well on the North American continent...it's not in OK, TX, or LA...it's in Ohio, just off exit 25 of I-77 in Caldwell.

It's called the Thorla McGhee Well. And, let's remember that Ohio has produced 8 of our nation's presidents.

So, we must work hard to keep that visionary leadership role in the future. We can't wait for others to do it...not when we have the already demonstrated "know how."

And we must also remember that once our K-12 students reach that critical "12" point, they need robust institutions of higher learning to attend...if, that is, we truly believe in a full continuum of educational choices.

So, we should not be thinking of Ohio's education system as K-12 and higher learning as separate and distinct parts...but as K-20, spanning the entire spectrum of education.

Otherwise, we're going to continue experiencing the brain drain in our state as our children leave for states like Florida and Texas who have no state income tax and are making much larger investments into their institutions of higher learning.

So, as state capital budgets for institutions of higher learning in Ohio began to decline... institutional debt and deferred maintenance balances increased, requiring institutions to make very tough financial decisions, resulting in rising tuition and other out of pocket costs for students and parents.

But we at YSU have worked hard to overcome these challenges, to keep both our debt and our tuition low...in fact we've kept YSU's tuition is relatively flat...\$2,000 less than most of our competing institutions. And our debt is between 2-6 times lower.

How do we do that? We make those tough financial decisions, and we do without a lot of things. We've prioritized maintaining our much-needed educational space, leaving the Student Center's maintenance needs dependent on band aid fixes. Our deferred maintenance backlog on the facility has resulted in leaking roofs, corroded and obstructed plumbing systems, and obsolete and inefficient HVAC systems.

So, for 60 years, we've limped along with these temporary fixes...and we can no longer ignore these critical infrastructure needs.

A more modern Student Center is extremely important to enrollment, student organizations, faculty, and student quality of life...and these needs are constantly changing.

And the challenges and cost of making the current facility's diminished quality and quantity of space seamlessly integrated with the region's larger community and business partners make it more even more important to give this facility some attention.

All of you went to college, so you know the importance of a strong Student Center. Recruitment is more effective when the Student Center is a front door for campus visitors. If we're not attractive to students on their initial visit, and if we're not providing that seamless integration with the business community, we risk losing on both ends of that spectrum, students and businesses, who will go to other states.

Well, I've spent a lot of time explaining **why** we need your help. Let me shift to what we're planning to do **when** we get it.

In 2021, we hired an experienced architectural team to do a feasibility study. This team pairs a firm that has designed over 180 Student Centers across the nation with another local firm that has a very long and impressive construction portfolio within the city of Youngstown. It's a team that can create a more modern, effective, and efficient Student Center...but also make it uniquely Youngstown.

They know our community. They worked with campus leaders, students, and staff to develop their plan. They then held more meetings with campus leaders, students, and staff to make sure they got it right. And they considered budgetary constraints and evolving needs in the process.

Our proposed renovation plan improves building accessibility, emergency exits, and brings us up to current code. It improves student organization spaces, including the lounge and assembly areas – that means more collaboration and interaction. It increases the indoor-outdoor connection, improves the building entrances, addresses wayfinding challenges.

I don't know how many of you have been there, Senator Rulli, I know you have...but that building is like a maze. Exactly what you'd expect in a 1960's vintage building.

Our plan consolidates and makes more efficient our food service options with open dining seating. Right now, we have a Chick-fil-a, Wendy's, Jamba Juice, and Dunkin' Donuts, and none of them are next to each other. So, our retail food service will be updated to consolidate most of them into one location and the associated dining areas will remain open for student use whenever the building is open.

Our plan expands the Student Center's Chestnut room – our largest and most versatile room on campus – and improves its function. This room hosts a wide variety of university and community activities. It was once the host of the local Vindicator Spelling Bee, and it drew a big crowd. But we had to move the Spelling Bee to Stambaugh Auditorium just off campus because we could no longer handle the volume of people. The room needs to be enlarged, receive updated finishings, and be provided with operable partitions so we can economize that space.

The building design includes a small theater - which will be more casual, student-focused, and provide space for late night activities – as well as meeting spaces in a variety of sizes for everyday use.

These are just a few of the many improvements and modifications that students, faculty, staff, and the greater community will experience.

Through the extensive planning and design process, we'll improve accessibility, utility, efficiency, and cost effectiveness of the Student Center, and will also result in a net reduction of square footage...because we're eliminating chopped up, currently unusable hallways.

We plan to bid this project out this fall and we'll break ground in Spring 2025...and if all goes well, we'll have our ribbon cutting in time for fall semester, 2027.

In full disclosure, there's also much-needed IT infrastructure included in our capital request.

So, in summary...we're asking for \$10.7 million in capital funding...(\$9.8 for Student Center, and \$.9 million for much needed IT). As a side note, we're also seeking an additional \$4.8 million in OTSCIF to go toward the Student Center project. But even if you grant our funding request, these funds only cover part of the Student Center cost. We understand we need skin in the game...and we have it!

The rest of the \$43.9 million dollars is coming from other sources, some of which is from donations from the greater community who love YSU and want to invest in our future. They know the importance of the Student Center to not only our campus community, but the entire region. I wish I could have brought some of them here today to share their love for YSU...so they can tell you themselves about the impact that YSU makes in the community. They're making the investment, and I sincerely hope you'll join them.

I'm not asking you to take a chance, I'm asking you to make an investment in a proven institution that plays a tremendously vital role in the economic, social, and cultural survival of Northeast Ohio.

Let me conclude with this...on the side of our shopping mall in Boardman Township reads the phrase "You can't break a city built from steel." In Youngstown, we bend, but we don't break. We're adaptable. We're resilient. We're persistent. And we deliver! We're here for the long-haul.

While we're known for being an industry town that has a university, the reality is that we've transitioned to a university town that has deep roots in industry, high-tech innovation, and an eye toward the future.

In other words, there's no Youngstown State without the Student Center and there is no Youngstown without Youngstown State.

And with that, I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.