

Testimony

By Adam Heffron, Executive Director of the Ohio Expositions Commission

before the House Agriculture Committee

February 26, 2025

Committee Meeting

Chairman Creech, Vice Chair Newman, ranking member Miller, and members of the committee, thank you for allowing me to appear before you and to speak about what the Ohio Expositions Commission sets out to accomplish as an organization, our biennial budget request, an update on our facility and grounds redevelopment known as, the Expo 2050 Master Plan and to share “Progress through Partnerships,” a key initiative to build business relationships. My name is Adam Heffron, I have been the Executive Director of the Ohio Expositions Commission for nearly a year and am excited about the opportunity to lead this great institution.

Mission:

The Ohio Expositions Commission’s mission is, *“To professionally operate and maintain for public benefit a year-round, service-oriented event facility and produce the annual state fair.”* The Ohio State Fair was formed by the Ohio Legislature, following the creation of the Board of Agriculture in 1846 and successful district fairs. The first State Fair in Ohio was held near Cincinnati in 1850. The Fair relocated many times during the early years and landed on the present-day site in 1886. We are now a Commission, referred to as the Ohio Expositions Commission which was established in 1961.

The Commission is comprised of 15 members, (nine of whom are appointed by the Governor), plus six ex-officio members: the Ohio House of Representatives Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, Chair of the Ohio Senate Agriculture Committee, the Director of Development, the Director of Agriculture and the Director of Natural Resources, The Dean of the Ohio State University College of Food, Agriculture, and Environmental Sciences. As Executive Director, I report to the Commission and lead the day-to-day operations of the Exposition Center.

Financial Makeup of the Expo Commission:

Year-to-year, we are largely financially self-sustaining, with revenue from both the State Fair and year-round events covering our expenses. We are thankful for the General Assembly’s support to help

benefit Ohio youth participating in the Ohio State Fair, with approximately \$380,000 annually awarded in the previous biennium, and ask for the same consideration in the next biennium. These funds help offset, but do not entirely cover the cost to support youth participating in the Fair, helping to pay for premiums and awards for young livestock exhibitors across the state, and to house and feed the All-Ohio State Fair Band & Youth Choir.

Expo's overall expenses for the next biennium are projected to be \$21 million annually. Approximately half of that budget expenditure goes towards the annual fair production. Revenues from sources such as gate admissions, food and beverage privilege payments, Celeste Center concert ticket sales, vendor and sponsor fees, rides and attractions and entry fees for exhibitors mostly off-set fair production expenses.

Our State Fair is a 12-day showcase of agriculture and celebration of our great state with entertainment, arts, music, headliner concerts, education, thrill rides and more. We strive to put this event of value to Ohioans, offering free admission for veterans, military, and first responders, as well as young children age 5 and under, and opportunities to purchase discount tickets for admission and midway attractions. We continue to make enhancements to fair programming every year.

The 360-acre campus is multi-functional: serving as a convention and conference center, festival grounds, arena, concert hall, public marketplace, sports venue, community center, and is home to nearly 200 different events with millions of visitors every year. For example, the Taft Coliseum can be transformed into a horse show arena with dirt, ice hockey rink, basketball forum, entertainment venue and back to a livestock arena with dirt within a matter of weeks. With unique offerings and ample square footage, the Ohio Expo Center event schedule boosts our bottom line and budget, but also attracts events to our state, to generate economic impact for the state and local community.

The other half of the Expo's annual operating expenses come from the general repair and maintenance of a large physical plant consisting of 30 buildings, 10,000 parking spaces, and green spaces such as Natural Resources Park, and expenses associated with hosting events held at the Expo. Revenue to cover those costs comes from rental of buildings and grounds, ancillary revenues such as parking, food, beverage, electrical services, and charge backs for equipment and labor.

Expo 2050 Master Plan Status:

I would like to thank the General Assembly and Governor DeWine, for their support with our ongoing Expo 2050 construction projects. We are thankful for the funds received over the last several years, that have already allowed us to make great progress in modernizing the Ohio Expo Center & State Fairgrounds.

Thanks to these funds and the overarching project, we have already built an 850-parking spot lot on a neighboring former National Guard armory site and converted an infrequently used building into a modern first aid center. We are currently building a new main entry gate, two new major buildings, renovations to three additional buildings, vital underground infrastructure work, extended site Wi-Fi, landscaping, hardscaping, shaded seating areas and more.

If you've visited recently, you know that our facility is an active construction site, with our team working to get all this work completed in 2026, with some work slated for completion prior to this year's Ohio State Fair. We're working closely with clients and event organizers to minimize disruption during this transformation, which will ultimately enhance everyone's experience at the Ohio Expo Center & State Fairgrounds.

Partnerships in Progress

Like with any successful business venture, the way to advance is through partnerships and strong business relationships in various areas of the public and private sector for both the Fair and Expo events.

Almost all state agencies exhibit at the Fair or are involved year-round, from the extensive support of the Ohio departments of Agriculture and Transportation to Ohio EPA's support of our emerging sustainability initiative, to Keep Ohio Beautiful, to the Ohio History Connection's partnership with the Ohio Showcase exhibit, as well as the involvement The Ohio State University, 4-H, FFA, and more.

Youth education and participation are the backbone of the State Fair, and within the Youth Exploration space in the Lausche building we receive key participation from groups like COSI, Battelle, Scouting America, Girl Scouts, 4-H and many other organizations. Moreover, our partnership with the Ohio Farm Bureau is important to educating and entertaining our guests about agriculture. The Ohio Farm Bureau is working in conjunction with the State Fair team, the Ohio Department of Agriculture, and other

leading associations and constitutes to plan a world class agriculture exhibit at the 2026 State Fair in our new agriculture building.

The Ohio Farm Bureau Federation and Ohio's diverse agricultural commodity groups such as the Ohio Beef Council, Dairy Association Midwest, Ohio Pork Council, Ohio Poultry Association, the Ohio Sheep Improvement Association and others producer groups are all true Partners in Progress and not only serve exceptional food items but exhibit at the State Fair and produce events at the Expo as well.

Conclusion:

Chairman Creech, Vice Chair Newman, ranking member Miller, and members of the committee, your support will enable the Ohio Expositions Commission to be financially viable, support youth participation, elevate the venue and State Fair to new heights and further our mission forward for the next fifteen decades.

Questions?

