



**State Tourism Director Sarah Wickham
Ohio Department of Development
Ohio House Arts, Athletics, and Tourism Committee
March 4, 2025**

Good afternoon, Chair Miller, Vice Chair Hiner, Ranking Member Jarrells, and members of the Arts, Athletics, and Tourism Committee.

I am Sarah Wickham, Communications and Marketing Chief at the Ohio Department of Development and your State Tourism Director. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the impact of tourism in Ohio, how we are maximizing our resources, and why continued investment in this industry is critical to our state's economic success.

When I first stepped into the role of State Tourism Director in 2023, I prioritized meeting with our tourism industry partners across the state. I needed to hear directly from them—destination marketing organizations, small business owners, and local leaders—about what they needed from us. Two clear priorities emerged:

First, they asked us to focus on marketing Ohio to out-of-state consumers, making sure Ohio becomes a top contender in their consideration set for travel plans.

Second, they wanted greater transparency in how we handle data and decision-making—more communication, collaboration, and tools so that we can all speak with one united voice.

We took these priorities to heart, and today, I want to share what we've accomplished, why this work matters to Ohio's economy, and how we can build on this momentum.

It Starts with a Visit

The great news is that when people visit Ohio, they love it! Ohio's strength and uniqueness is the tremendous variety of attractions and experiences that make our state relevant to so many visitors. Research tells us that 90% of overnight visitors were satisfied with their Ohio trip, 93% would recommend Ohio to others, and 84% are likely to visit Ohio again in the next 12 months. This means that people want to come back for more of the places and experiences that made their visit so memorable.

Tourism is a Proven Economic Driver

Beyond the joyful memories travel creates, tourism is a powerful economic driver – fueling jobs, fostering business growth, and generating tax revenue the sustains essential services in communities across Ohio.

In 2023 alone, tourism in Ohio generated \$56 billion in visitor spending and supported 436,000 jobs. This influx of visitors generated \$4.6 billion in state and local tax revenue.

This is a high-return industry. When people visit Ohio, they spend money at local businesses, hotels, restaurants, and attractions. The dollars they leave behind circulate through the economy, creating jobs and opportunities in communities large and small.

Strategic Investments: Why Marketing Ohio Beyond Our Borders Matters

As lawmakers, you want to see a return on investment for public dollars—and so do we. That’s why transparency and data-driven decision-making have become a cornerstone of our approach. One of the most impactful ways we can grow this industry is by bringing more out-of-state visitors to Ohio. Research shows that attracting visitors from outside Ohio provides a greater economic return than focusing solely on in-state travelers.

For example, in 2023, TourismOhio spent \$3.3 million on its advertising campaign. Of that, \$2.1 million was spent within Ohio, generating 228,000 incremental trips and \$54 million in visitor spending. However, with just \$1.2 million spent on out-of-state advertising, we saw nearly twice as many incremental trips and nearly three times the visitor spending at \$163 million.

In other words, our out-of-state marketing is bringing in more visitors and more visitor revenue per dollar spent. That’s why we’ve strategically focused on key markets like Detroit, Pittsburgh, Charleston-Huntington, Grand Rapids, Louisville, Lexington, and Buffalo—areas where Ohio has a strong competitive advantage due to drive time, affordability, and regional appeal.

We are making smart, data-driven decisions to stretch every tourism dollar further, ensuring we are bringing in visitors who wouldn’t otherwise consider Ohio as a destination.

Leveraging Digital Marketing for Higher Returns

We’ve also expanded our digital advertising strategy—not just because it’s cost-effective, but because it allows us to target high-value visitors based on their interests and behaviors.

For example, a foodie in Pittsburgh sees an ad featuring Ohio’s James Beard Award-winning chefs. A family in Detroit sees why COSI—USA Today’s Best Science Museum four years running—makes for the perfect weekend getaway. We are not marketing Ohio as a single attraction—we are marketing an entire network of experiences, tailored to the travelers most likely to visit and spend.

Building on Local Success & Expanding Opportunities

TourismOhio is committed to supporting local businesses and communities by helping them tap into the economic power of tourism. And it’s not just about numbers—it’s about giving our local partners the tools they need to amplify our message.

Through partnerships with Ohio Travel Association and the Ohio Association of Convention and Visitors Bureaus, we’ve developed unified talking points so that all of us—state leaders, tourism officials, and business owners—can speak with one voice about Ohio’s tourism industry: Together, we can focus on five key messages that really resonate:

- People love visiting Ohio.
- Tourism is a major economic driver.

- Tourism creates jobs and supports small businesses.
- Advertising influences travel decisions.
- Visits improve Ohio's image for economic development.

When Ohio thrives as a visitor destination, it becomes more attractive as a place to live, to learn, to work, and invest.

Additionally, in the past year and a half, we've expanded several key programs:

- Added 18 new stops to the Holiday Lights Trail that includes festive stops such as Candy Cane Trail at Freer Field in Ashland, Hensville Lights in Toledo, Joy of Christmas Light Show in Columbiana, Yuletide Village, and WinterFest at Kings Island in Warren County.
- Welcomed 34 additional scoop shops to the Ohio Ice Cream Trail including favorites like Round Hill Dairy and Velvet Ice Cream in Knox, Cockeye Creamery in Trumbull, Lake Erie Scoops and Weber's Premium Vintage Ice Cream in Cuyahoga County, and Handel's Homemade Ice Cream & Yogurt in Mahoning.
- Partnered with counties to create 55 county-specific eclipse pages touting 450 events along the path of totality in Ashland, Medina, Lorain, Ottawa, and Wood Counties.
- Launched a seasonal festival guide with over 440 events per season, featuring five events from ALL 88 counties across Ohio!
- Added about 40 new Adventure Trails showcasing the incredible variety of themed trails that cater to every interest like the Shores and Islands Antiques Trail in Erie and Tinsel & Traditions in Fairfield County,
- Added 15 stops to the Ohio Historical Underground Railroad Trail bringing added visibility to Kelton House and Hanby House in Franklin County, Historic Roscoe Village in Coshocton and Oberlin Heritage Center in Lorain.

And the results? When our partners engage, the impact multiplies. In 2022, TourismOhio promoted the Holiday Lights Trail primarily through state channels, and it performed well. In 2023, our local partners joined in—issuing press releases, sharing content, and engaging with our marketing efforts. The result? Pageviews increased 95% year-over-year, a clear indicator of increased traveler interest and intent to visit. When we all work together, the impact is exponential.

Why Continued Investment in Tourism Matters

Ohio has a strong foundation in tourism, but we are competing against other states for visitors and their spending. Every dollar we invest in tourism marketing returns \$66 in visitor spending and \$5 in tax ROI to our economy. And unlike other industries, tourism investments pay off quickly. The moment we bring a visitor to Ohio, they spend money in our communities—supporting local jobs and businesses immediately. This is why continued funding and support for tourism marketing is not just a good idea—it's a smart economic strategy.

Conclusion: Working Together to Grow Ohio's Economy

Ohio's tourism success is not just about our team at TourismOhio. It's about the thousands of small businesses, attractions, and local leaders working to make this state an incredible place to visit. But for

them to succeed, we must continue investing in smart, strategic marketing—the kind that brings in visitors, supports jobs, and grows our economy. As you consider future investments in Ohio’s tourism industry, I ask you to see this as an economic development opportunity—one with immediate returns for businesses, workers, and communities across the state.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to supporting tourism in Ohio. I welcome any questions you may have.