



Celebrating 250 Years of American Independence

**Ohio House of Representatives
Arts, Athletics, and Tourism Committee
Hon. Melanie Miller, Chair**

**Testimony from Todd Kleismit, America 250-Ohio Executive Director
Tuesday, March 4, 2025**

Chairwoman Miller and members of the Committee:

It's a great honor to have been invited to testify before the Arts, Athletics, and Tourism Committee. I am so delighted that Speaker Huffman chose to create this new Committee and appreciate the work you're doing. My name is Todd Kleismit and I serve as the executive director for the Ohio Commission for the U.S. Semiquincentennial, better known to you as "America 250-Ohio."

I know many of you already know a fair amount about the Commission, but I did want to take a moment at the beginning to share a few things that will relate more directly to the Committee's work. Our Commission was formed in 2022 and we have since been working to build momentum, public awareness and engagement all over the state. There is a national America250 Commission and we are in close communication and collaboration with them. In fact, a few of us will soon be traveling to Colonial Williamsburg for a national convening of the various state's America 250 planners – national, state and local.

One thing I have observed as we move swiftly toward the nation's 250th anniversary next year... Most things will happen state by state. That is our major focus here in Ohio. We are very focused on promoting what Ohio and Ohioans have contributed to the United States and its history these past 250+ years. We're also localizing this work as much as possible. Let me give you a couple of examples.

We spent much of 2024 encouraging our 88 counties – as well as cities, villages and townships – to pass resolutions declaring their intent to fully participate in the nation's landmark anniversary. I am pleased to report that all 88 counties have now become designated as "America 250-Ohio Communities." Well over 100 other local communities have done likewise. Ohio is all in – and that list grows each week. You can find out more online at america250-ohio.org/communities.

Second, it seemed like such a gift when someone suggested that we engage the communities located along U.S. Route 250 and tie together the themes of America 250 with U.S. Route 250. The Route stretches from Sandusky and Lake Erie southeastward through nine Ohio counties before crossing the Ohio River in Belmont County. It then continues through West Virginia and

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ends in Richmond, Virginia. In Ohio, the communities along U.S. Route 250 offer an outstanding array of tourism destinations as vital to Ohio's economy as Cedar Point in Sandusky and college towns such as Ashland and Wooster and places rich with significant history. Think about the Thomas Edison Birthplace in Milan and the historic sites in Tuscarawas County. Did you know Ohio has a Revolutionary War site? Be sure to check out Fort Laurens in Bolivar, Schoenbrunn Village and the Dennison Railroad Depot in Dennison. Does anyone know the back story of why Ohio has "Firelands?" Look into the history of Norwalk, Ohio and how it got its name. Did you know Wooster was named for a Revolutionary War general? How did New Philadelphia get its name? These are all things tied into the era of the Revolutionary War and the American Indians who lived here and remain a big part of the stories to be told.

Again, Ohio is all in for the 250th. And when it comes to tourism, it is not simply a nice thing for us to do. It is an important part of our charge in the Ohio Revised Code, Sect. 149.309.

(F) The commission shall do all of the following:

- (1) Plan, coordinate, and implement an overall program to build public awareness and foster public participation to celebrate and commemorate the two hundred fiftieth anniversary of the independence and founding of the United States;
- (2) Coordinate with all federal, state, and local agencies and private organizations on infrastructural improvements and **projects or programs to welcome and encourage regional, national, and international tourists.**

At a time when visitors are seeking authentic experiences, rich storytelling and opportunities to tap into their personal interests, America 250-Ohio is delivering exactly what they want and turning heads toward Ohio. From the beginning, we have integrated the economic drivers of travel into many of our programs, not just because visitor spending is good for local communities and the state, but also because we want people to feel, touch, and experience the Ohio story. We want to inspire, to delight, and to make a difference. It's a strategy that is working.

Here are just a few examples:

- The **Ohio Air & Space Trail** demonstrates the state's importance in aviation and aerospace yesterday, today and in the future. It links 34 museums, science centers and other sites where visitors can personally experience this story. Sites have reported increased visitation, as well as renewed inspiration as we've brought them together.
- The **Ohio Creativity Trail** launched a few weeks ago and connects sites that showcase how Ohioans have revolutionized artistic expression in six different genres – literature and illustrations, music, glass and pottery, folk and traditional arts, visual arts and even carousel art. This Trail features more than 100 sites throughout the state. It has already gained popularity with more than 30 lead stories and 5,000 website visits in the first month. The editorial board at *The Plain Dealer* wrote this about the Ohio Creativity Trail after its launch:

"The America 250-Ohio Commission's experiential 'trails' project is ingenious and inviting. It highlights the contributions of gifted and

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industrious Ohioans to the intellectual and material betterment of our state, and of the United States as a whole, in an array of sites that have endured, despite challenges. The cultural achievements of Ohio's people, whether in the popular or fine arts, call us all to a greater appreciation of our braided heritage – in race, land, or tongue. Visiting these sites reminds us that we are fellow strivers in a state peppered, in its every corner, with gifted neighbors, sharing their talents with the rest of us."

- Four additional trails are underway, each focusing on a characteristic or trait that defines the uniqueness and advantage of Ohio as a place to live, work and visit. These future trails will focus on our **waterways and freshwater access, leadership, transportation networks and innovation**. It's one thing to tell people Ohio has these things; showing them and letting them experience it for themselves is both innovative and impactful. At the same time, we're encouraging visitor spending in our communities. Each trail features an interactive map that links to the site and their local Convention & Visitors Bureau.
- **Ohio Goes to the Movies**, another signature program that is getting attention coast-to-coast, is a statewide film series that will occur throughout much of 2026. Community-led film screenings and festivities are being planned to highlight Ohio's and Ohioan's vast contributions to filmmaking, in front of and behind the camera.
- Our **4th Grade History Pass** program has more than 50 history-related museums and attractions across the state rallied around providing free admission for 4th grade Ohioans who are in the midst of studying the history of our great state.

These are just a few of the programs either underway or preparing to launch. And we are not doing this alone. Just looking at the Signature Programming and Events I've mentioned, more than 400 businesses and organizations are actively involved. This is an incredible collaboration within the state where folks are contributing their time, ideas and talents for the good of Ohio.

One of our assignments is to increase awareness, and I'm proud to say that one year out, our work has already generated more than 70 million impressions and 62 news stories just through our earned media efforts. We are turning heads toward Ohio, and we've only just begun.

Let me close with a few words of thanks. The America 250-Ohio Commission is in a strong position to succeed in making the very most of the nation's 250th anniversary next year due to the support we've received from the DeWine Administration and the Ohio General Assembly.

Our Commission benefits greatly from a wonderful group of stakeholders, both those serving on the Commission and other leaders. Melinda Huntley of the Ohio Travel Association, Donna Collins from the Ohio Arts Council and Wendy Zucal from the Dennison Railroad Depot all provide leadership to our Signature Events and Public Programming Committee and they are doing an amazing job. Finally, I also want to thank each of you for your service on this important new Arts, Athletics and Tourism Committee. We look forward to working with you these next two years. Thank you again for the opportunity to be with you today. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have of me.

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