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Columbus Partnership
Interested Party Testimony for HB 96
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Chair Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on HB 96, the state operating budget. My name is Jeff Polesovsky, and I am the Senior Vice President of Government Affairs for the Columbus Partnership.

The Columbus Partnership is a nonprofit, membership-based leadership organization of 82 chairpersons, chief executive officers, and senior executives from the Region's leading businesses and institutions. Our members include Fortune 500 CEOs, leaders of top universities, and the world's largest private, nonprofit research and development organization. The Partnership is committed to advancing a shared vision of making the Columbus Region the most prosperous in the country. Through collaboration, our leaders focus on key opportunities to drive economic development, improve mobility, shape public policy, strengthen education, cultivate leadership, enhance philanthropy, elevate community branding, and support downtown growth.

Safe and efficient transportation infrastructure is critical to sustaining the Columbus Region's strong economic momentum. With this budget, the General Assembly has a key opportunity to reestablish and expand passenger rail service within the coming decade. Investing in passenger rail is about more than infrastructure, it's about securing Ohio's economic future. A well-connected state attracts businesses, creates jobs, and improves quality of life for residents. By modernizing our transportation network, Ohio will strengthen our position as a leader in innovation, a destination for investment, and a place where businesses and families can thrive.

The Federal Railroad Administration has already approved four key corridors in Ohio, including the 3C+D line (connecting Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, and Cincinnati) and the Midwest Connect (linking Chicago, Lima, Columbus, and Pittsburgh). By utilizing existing infrastructure for a more affordable solution, these routes will enhance links between urban and rural areas, opening up economic and travel possibilities for millions of Ohio residents.

On behalf of the Columbus Partnership, we strongly support two amendments that will help make this vision a reality:

1. **State Matching Funds** – Representative Mathews is offering an amendment to appropriate \$2 million in General Revenue Funds over the biennium. This will provide the critical matching dollars needed to unlock federal funding and advance Ohio's passenger rail projects to the next stage of development.

2. **State Support for Passenger Rail Office** – Representative Blasdel is sponsoring an amendment to appropriate \$3 million in General Revenue Funds over the biennium. This would establish a dedicated Passenger Rail Office within the Ohio Rail Development Commission (ORDC) to coordinate and oversee the state’s passenger rail efforts.

Studies show that every dollar invested in rail generates four dollars in economic benefit. Another study, by All Aboard Ohio, estimates that the 3C+D corridor alone could generate up to \$47 million in additional annual GDP, create as many as 1,200 jobs, and generate up to \$21 million in new wages. It is clear that investing in passenger rail generates long-term economic benefits for the entire state and its residents.

Business leaders across Ohio recognize that we are at a pivotal moment – a moment that demands bold action to invest in passenger rail. In response, the Columbus Partnership and the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC) joined forces in 2021 to create the Rail Executive Network, a coalition of Central Ohio leaders dedicated to shaping the future of rail in our state. This public-private partnership unites key stakeholders from government, business, and the civic community to drive strategic planning, advocacy, and leadership, ensuring that regional rail initiatives move from vision to reality.

We’ve also found that Ohio residents are aligned with the business community in their support of passenger rail. A 2023 MORPC survey found that passenger rail was the top-ranked transportation priority for residents across their 15-county region, with 74% saying it would be “very or extremely helpful.”

The support for passenger rail from both the business community and Ohio residents underscores the urgency of moving these projects forward. With strong public backing and a clear economic case, now is the time for Ohio to seize this opportunity and take meaningful steps toward a modernized, connected transportation network.

Chair Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding HB 96’s investment in the future of transportation in Ohio.