

**Interested Party Testimony- House Finance Committee
HB 96 — FY26-27 State Operating Budget
March 13th, 2025**

Chairman Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney and members of the committee.

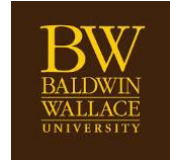
Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 96 — in support of Baldwin Wallace University's funding request of \$2.5.M over the biennium through the Department of Development's Local Development Projects line — to use the NEOFIX program to support drone infrastructure for safety and community development to interesting partner communities throughout Ohio. This infrastructure provides and promotes a safe setting for drone use by law enforcement, government, and healthcare providers that saves cost and promotes economic growth and job development. **This funding level offers opportunity for the program to prospectively include** Richland County, Portage County, Cincinnati, Butler County, and Springfield/Clark County.

My name is Dr. Stuart Mendel, Affiliate Professor at Baldwin Wallace University and Project Director for the Northeast Ohio Flight Information Exchange also known as the NEOFIX. The University serves as the focal point for this applied research and community engagement program to fulfill its visioned role as a leading regional comprehensive university impacting learners, businesses, and communities throughout the Great Lakes region.

As more drones are being used by public agencies, companies, and private citizens, concerns about flight safety continue to rise. Ohio's new law, Ohio House Bill 77 sponsored by Representative Willis last General Assembly, establishes regulations for drones, but law enforcement still faces challenges in enforcing laws due to limited knowledge of who is flying and where. At the same time, a drone-friendly state offers high growth potential for economic and job growth. To fully capitalize on these opportunities and promote safety, we must invest in drone safety and operations infrastructure. By leveraging the successful NEOFIX drone-safety model from Northeast Ohio to five other regions of the state we will improve public safety and unlock this economic potential.

Cuyahoga County has successfully demonstrated this infrastructure through the NEOFIX which is an early stage building block providing data that supports safe, effective, and compliant drone flight operations. NEOFIX is vital technology infrastructure necessary to promote a friendly setting for drone use, repair, and manufacturing industry and jobs development. Similar to charts and maps with hazards and other advisories to inform air operations, NEOFIX provides information on operating in the community and on other aircraft in the area. NEOFIX supports HB 77 and the 2022 FlyOhio vision to make Ohio airspace among the first in the nation ready to fly beyond-line-of-sight AAM.

NEOFIX is fully operational in Cuyahoga County thanks to more than 100 stakeholders including public safety offices like law enforcement and fire, industry partners, hospital systems, Metroparks, and more. However, as we roll this out into other counties, we will work with and support their stakeholders to make this fit their communities.



You may wonder if this is needed and if it is needed now. The answer to both is yes! Focusing on drone operations, regulations, and infrastructure as a first step is crucial for Ohio to fully benefit from Advanced Air Mobility (AAM) while addressing safety concerns and policy issues. Drones are already commercially available and widely used across various industries, with a well-established market and clear use cases. By starting with drones, which are generally easier to integrate into existing airspace due to their smaller size and lower risk profiles, Ohio can take advantage of current and pending FAA regulations and unlock substantial amounts of private capital that are waiting for the right place to invest. Building drone infrastructure and regulations lays the groundwork for safety standards, airspace management, and infrastructure which will be essential for the future of AAM.

The state's investment in this project will help us better understand the operating cost of the project and fully understand the economic value of the system. We can use this as a template for entire state which will drive private and capital investment from outside the state, as I just mentioned. **The method for developing the infrastructure in the regions of the State arises from uses proposed by the communities, as they conceive drone operations in their community and region.**

This funding request supports program activities to prepare Ohio communities for drone integration, publish appropriate rules and regulations for drone operations in Ohio, acquire cost-effective sensor equipment to give public safety and drone operators an “eye in the sky,” and to help participating communities seed public and private drone operations that create new services and opportunities in their community.

I respectfully request your support of our budget request so we can make Ohio a leading state in AAM.

I will now take any questions you may have.

Dr. Stuart Mendel
Northeast Ohio Flight Information Exchange
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