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## Ohio House Transportation Committee

### House Bill 54

#### Interested Party Testimony

February 11, 2025

*Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency (NOACA)*

*Grace Gallucci, Executive Director and CEO*

Chairman Willis, Vice-Chair Daniels, Ranking Member Grim, and Members of the House Transportation Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on House Bill 54, Ohio's Biennial Transportation Budget for State Fiscal Years (SFY) 2026-2027.

I am the Executive Director and CEO of the Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency (NOACA), the federally designated metropolitan planning organization (MPO) that conducts transportation and environmental planning for Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake, Lorain, and Medina Counties. On behalf of NOACA, I am pleased to express my appreciation to Governor DeWine, the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT), and the Ohio Legislature for their continued support for funding and policies that will sustain and improve Northeast Ohio's transportation network to support economic development and quality of life in our communities, particularly in light of the fiscal constraints posed by declining motor fuel tax revenues and rising construction costs.

NOACA especially applauds Governor DeWine's and the Ohio Department of Transportation's (ODOT's) focus on transportation safety initiatives and funding. During COVID and in the years following, NOACA has heard from many local elected officials who are concerned about the continuing high crash rates in their communities. NOACA supported the Governor's distracted driving proposal – now law – that has already improved safety on our roadways. NOACA will continue to work with local communities in their efforts to improve safety for all users of our transportation network: drivers, passengers, transit riders, bicyclists, and pedestrians. As such, we very much appreciate the partnership of Governor DeWine and ODOT in this endeavor, and we will continue to explore ways to work together on new safety initiatives and funding.

Also, NOACA is pleased that the State of Ohio was awarded funding through the federal Corridor Identification and Development (Corridor ID) Program to explore new passenger rail service in Ohio. Two potential routes (Cleveland-Columbus-Dayton-Cincinnati and Cleveland-Toledo-Detroit) would provide new service for Northeast Ohioans. NOACA's Board has strongly supported the expansion of passenger rail opportunities as one of its top legislative/policy priorities, and we stand ready to work



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## Ohio House Transportation Committee House Bill 54 Interested Party Testimony, February 11, 2025 Grace Gallucci, Executive Director and CEO, NOACA Page 2

with the Ohio Rail Development Commission and other entities to advance these proposed new routes at the appropriate time and through future budgets.

NOACA continues to oppose a provision of Ohio law that was enacted as part of the most recent (SFY 2024-2025) Biennial Transportation Budget. ORC 5501.60 requires the construction of interstate interchanges at specific locations via a complex formula that only applies to one specific location in Ohio: on I-71 at the border between Cuyahoga and Medina Counties – despite the strong opposition of many elected officials and residents, particularly in Medina County. This provision of Ohio law attempts to bypass well-established federal and state legal and regulatory processes for creating or modifying new interchanges on the Interstate Highway System. In particular, ORC 5501.60 attempts to circumvent a Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) requirement that an Interchange Justification Study be completed prior to final approval by the U.S. Secretary of Transportation.

In addition, ORC 5501.60 bypasses the federally established decision-making role of MPOs, like NOACA, on significant decisions about the region's transportation system. MPOs were established by federal law to enable consensus-building among communities and local elected officials to facilitate a regional approach to transportation planning and funding, and to address needs that are specific to a given region. ORC 5501.60 attempts to overrule this consensus-based approach, as well as other federal and state legal and regulatory requirements.

NOACA's Board, via Resolution 2023-045, unanimously stated its opposition to ORC 5501.60 and its strong support for House and Senate bills, originally introduced in the 135<sup>th</sup> General Assembly and reintroduced in the 136<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, to repeal this provision of law. In addition, NOACA, in partnership ODOT, recently hired a consultant to conduct a comprehensive study of congestion issues along the I-71 subarea between Cuyahoga and Medina Counties. This study will assess current conditions, explore potential alternatives, and recommend feasible alternatives that will improve transportation accessibility, mobility, and traffic operation within the study area. The consulting firm will utilize traffic simulation models at macro and micro levels to evaluate existing and future traffic conditions and recommend feasible alternatives that meet the needs of all communities. The area of focus will include not only the interstate corridor and its interchanges, but also the major intersections and main streets in the subarea.

In light of all this, NOACA strongly supports any amendments that may be offered to this Biennial Transportation Budget to repeal ORC 5501.60. NOACA will continue to support efforts to ensure that interstate highway interchange decisions are made in accordance with established federal, state, and MPO legal requirements and processes, and with full and fair consideration of public input from all impacted communities.



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## Ohio House Transportation Committee House Bill 54 Interested Party Testimony, February 11, 2025 Grace Gallucci, Executive Director and CEO, NOACA Page 3

NOACA continues to support increased and predictable funding for public transit. In Northeast Ohio, public transit represents a significant portion of the region's overall transportation network. Reliable funding for public transit is vital to the continuous planning and investment needed to provide all residents with convenient and affordable access to jobs, health care, clean air, and a good quality of life. Unfortunately, Ohio continues to lag behind most states in per capita transit funding, and historical disinvestment has left the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority (GCRTA), Laketran, and other Northeast Ohio transit agencies with inadequate funding to meet demand.

In fact, NOACA continues to support the recommendations contained in ODOT's 2015 Ohio Transit Needs Study, which suggested investing \$185 million annually in statewide public transportation funding by 2025. NOACA supports creation of a long-term dedicated source of public transit funding, to increase competitiveness and attract new businesses, jobs, and residents. Distributions from such a fund should reflect and leverage local investments made by communities – for example, by providing matching funds to locally generated transit revenue. This would create even more value for Ohio's transit investments.

In the most recent Biennial Transportation Budget, NOACA appreciated the Legislature's inclusion of the Ohio Regional Workforce Mobility Partnership Program. This represented an important investment in workforce mobility that supported job creation, workforce retention, and talent recruitment in Ohio. NOACA supports continued funding for this important program and respectfully requests that the Legislature consider continued funding for this initiative, using both Flex Funds and General Revenue Fund dollars.

Finally, I would just note that NOACA supported Governor DeWine's 2019 user fee increase on gasoline and diesel fuel. We will continue to oppose any efforts to reduce these fees, which are vitally important to ODOT and local governments for roadway maintenance, and we look forward to working with the Governor and the Legislature on future initiatives to improve the state's ability to adequately fund Ohio's transportation system – vital to economic growth and quality of life. In addition, NOACA supports efforts to ensure that Ohio's transportation funding formulas send user fee dollars back to the regions and communities where they were collected, in the true spirit of a "user fee".

In closing, I would like to thank Governor DeWine, ODOT, this Committee, and the Ohio Legislature for the hard work that goes into funding and maintaining Ohio's extensive transportation system, and I appreciate the opportunity to provide this testimony on behalf of NOACA.