

# Testimony

**By Adam Heffron, Executive Director of the Ohio Expositions Commission  
before the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee**

April 30, 2025

## **Welcome:**

Chairman Schaffer, Vice Chair Koehler, ranking member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the committee, thank you for allowing me to appear before you and speak about the Ohio Expositions Commission's biennial budget request. My name is Adam Heffron, I have been the Executive Director of the Ohio Expositions Commission for a little more than a year, and I'm excited about the future of this great institution.

## **Background:**

The Ohio Expositions Commission's mission is *"To professionally operate and maintain for public benefit a year-round, service-oriented event facility and produce the annual state fair."* In 1846, the State Board of Agriculture was formed, and among their first acts were to create district fairs. Following the success of those fairs, the Ohio State Fair was created and held near Cincinnati in 1850. The Fair relocated many times during the early years between 10 different Ohio cities, eventually landing at its current home in 1886. Our current structure was solidified in 1961 with the formation of the Ohio Expositions Commission. Today, the Commission is comprised of 15 dedicated board members representing the agriculture and business industries in Ohio and is staffed by 57 employees. As Executive Director, I report to the Commission and lead the day-to-day operations of the Expositions Center.

In addition to organizing and hosting a first-class State Fair, with an average attendance of just under a million people per year, the Ohio Expositions Commission also operates as a premier event venue. The 360-acre campus is multi-functional: serving as a convention and conference center, festival grounds, arena, concert hall, public marketplace, sports venue, and community center. As an example of our versatility, the Taft Coliseum can be transformed into a horse show arena with dirt, to an ice hockey rink, to a basketball court, to entertainment venue and back to a livestock arena with dirt within a matter of weeks.

We are home to nearly 200 different events, bringing in millions of visitors from all over the state, country, and the world. With unique venues the Ohio Expo Center attracts events to our state that generates a significant economic impact for the state and local community.

### **The Ohio State Fair:**

Our State Fair is a 12-day showcase of agriculture and a celebration of our great state with entertainment, arts, music, education, agricultural competitions, thrill rides, and so much more. We strive to put this event on at a value to Ohioans, offering free admission for veterans, military, and first responders, as well as children age 5 and under, and opportunities to purchase discount tickets for admission and midway attractions.

Youth education and participation are the backbone of the State Fair, and within the Youth Exploration Space in the Lausche building, we have received key participation from groups such as COSI, Battelle, Scouting America, Girl Scouts, 4-H, and many other organizations. Moreover, our partnership with the Ohio Farm Bureau is vital to educating our guests about agriculture. The Ohio Farm Bureau is working in conjunction with the State Fair team, the Ohio Department of Agriculture, and other agricultural commodity associations to develop a world class agriculture exhibit in our new agriculture building for the 2026 State Fair.

We are proud to share that dozens of state agencies exhibit at the Fair or are involved on an ongoing basis. We have great partnerships with Ohio DNR, Ohio Departments of Agriculture and Transportation, as well as the Ohio History Connection, The Ohio State University, Ohio EPA, Keep Ohio Beautiful, and more.

Ohio's agricultural commodity groups such as the Ohio Beef Council, American Dairy Association Mideast, Ohio Pork Council, Ohio Poultry Association, and the Ohio Sheep Improvement Association and other producer groups are true partners in progress and not only serve exceptional food items but exhibit at the State Fair and produce events at the Expo Center facility as well.

### **Financial Makeup of the Expo Commission:**

We are largely financially self-sustaining, generating revenue from both the State Fair and year-round events to cover our ongoing operating expenses. On our budget request, you will note that our overall

expenses for the next biennium are projected to be \$21.03 million annually. The vast majority of these funds are self-generated through categories such as State Fair admission and concert ticket sales, vendor and sponsor fees, rides and attraction revenue, as well as year-round event rent, food and beverage revenue, parking, and more.

Approximately half of our budget expenditures goes toward the annual State Fair production, and the remaining half goes to oversight and maintenance of our vast facility. Facility expenses include utilities, general repair and maintenance of 30 buildings across hundreds of acres of land, areas such as green spaces and parking lots, as well as staffing and labor.

While we work diligently to generate the revenue to cover our agency's expenses, we remain incredibly thankful for the General Assembly's support for Ohio youth participating in the Ohio State Fair, with approximately \$380,000 annually awarded in the previous biennium through GRF funds and respectfully ask for the same consideration in the coming biennium. These funds help offset, but do not entirely cover, the cost to support youth participating in the Fair, helping to pay for premiums and awards for young livestock exhibitors across the state, and to house and feed the renowned All-Ohio State Fair Band & Youth Choir. We appreciate your support of Ohio's future leaders.

#### **Expo 2050 Master Plan Status:**

I would like to thank the General Assembly and Governor DeWine for their support with our ongoing Expo 2050 construction projects. We are grateful for the funds received over the last several years that have already allowed us to make great progress in modernizing the Ohio Expo Center & State Fairgrounds.

Thanks to these funds and the overarching project, we have already built an 850-space parking lot on a neighboring former National Guard armory site and converted an infrequently used building into a modern first aid center. We are currently building a new main entry gate, two new major buildings, renovating three additional buildings, performing vital underground infrastructure work, extending site Wi-Fi, landscaping, hardscaping, creating shaded seating areas and more.

If you've visited recently, you know that our facility is an active construction site, with our team working to get all this work completed in 2026, with some work slated for completion prior to this

year's Ohio State Fair. We're working closely with event organizers to minimize disruption during this transformation, which will ultimately enhance everyone's experience as a guest on the grounds.

**Conclusion:**

As with any successful business venture, the way to advance is through partnerships and strong business relationships in various areas of the public and private sector for both the Fair and year-round events. I strive to build these partnerships and operate a versatile year-round event facility and produce the annual Ohio State Fair in a way that makes our state proud.

Chairman Schaffer, Vice Chair Koehler, ranking member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the committee, your support will enable the Ohio Expositions Commission to be financially viable, support youth participation, elevate the venue and State Fair to new heights and further our mission for years to come.

With that, may I answer any questions?