

Senate Agriculture & Natural Resources Committee

Interested Party Testimony, House Bill 96 (Stewart)

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Chair Schaffer, Vice Chair Koehler, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson and members of the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit Interested Party Testimony on House Bill 96, the main operating budget for fiscal years 2026 and 2027.

Greater Ohio Policy Center (GOPC) advocates for a modern transportation and mobility network that is safe for users of all modes and contributes to community vibrancy.

In the next 25 years, Ohio is projected to lose 5.7% of its 2020 population. This means we will have fewer rate payers available to support the long-term maintenance costs of Ohio's highways and roadways. During this same time period, Ohio's motor fuel tax receipts are expected to decline.

Simultaneously, the share of aging Ohioans will grow and their desire for independence will continue. Working age Ohioans, especially those in urban job centers, will look at other states and expect Ohio to have a similar range of transportation options that are safe and convenient.

To continue connecting Ohioans to opportunity and independence, Ohio must protect the important transportation assets we already have and prepare for a future where a variety of transportation modes will safely and efficiently connect Ohioans to work, school, medical services, and desired amenities.

1.) Maintain Ohio's Strong Support for Public Transportation

Over the past six years, the state of Ohio has maintained a historically high level of investment in public transportation funding. This investment has enabled Ohio's public transit agencies to invest in services to get workers to jobs, students to school, and seniors and people with disabilities access to destinations and services they might not otherwise have.

The as-introduced budget proposed to flat-fund the state's investment in public transportation at \$37 million per year. GOPC strongly supports this continued investment and encourages the Senate to maintain this funding as part of the biennial budget proposal.

2.) Support Rail Expansion

Expanding passenger rail service in Ohio will increase connections between and within the state's regions and connect Ohio to the Midwest. This connectivity will be vital as remote and

hybrid workplaces remain the norm. Viable cross-state passenger rail will reduce the assumed need for roadway expansion and allow existing rail infrastructure to better support the increased demands of commercial and industrial freight logistics.

The House-passed budget adopts the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Compact, an important step for Ohio to work with other Midwest states to coordinate and support regional improvements to passenger rail service. Additionally, the budget appropriates approximately \$50,000 over the biennium to cover the cost of Ohio's membership in the Compact. GOPC strongly supports the adoption of the Compact and urges the Senate to retain these provisions as an important step to enable continued work to expand these highly sought after service routes in Ohio.

3.) Protect Active Transportation Investment Throughout Ohio

Local governments and ODOT are making streets safer for cyclists, pedestrians, transit-riders, and drivers, and thus communities more attractive to residents and businesses. However, funding for these safety measures is modest and typically implemented through individual, small-scale projects. Most of Ohio's local roadways have few or no options for non-drivers, due to their current design. As a result, today's roadway designs are a large factor in Ohio's stunningly high rate of pedestrian injuries and crashes.

Recent findings from the Ohio Department of Transportation show that walking and biking infrastructure reduced injuries and crashes. And that proximity to pedestrian and cycling infrastructures helps to increase property value by as much as 3-14% for homes within a quarter mile of a trail, and approximately 1.1% for trails within a mile. Altogether, trails raise home values by \$1.6 billion statewide, creating \$182 million in additional property tax revenue for communities each year.

The same report shows that active transportation infrastructure helped to generate \$8.81 million in business sales in Ohio in 2024. This included \$1.74 million in food and beverage services, \$1.26 million in recreational activities, \$1.21 million in retail, and \$941 thousand in lodging.

Maintain local government tools that enable communities to build transportation systems desired by residents, businesses, and visitors.

We are very concerned about language added by the House to HB96 which would prohibit the use of eminent domain for recreational trail projects. This language would hamper the development of active transportation infrastructure throughout Ohio and runs the risk of limiting access to these activities throughout Ohio.

We can all agree that eminent domain should be rare and only used as a last resort. It is rarely used for takings involving recreational trails. However, it is essential that trails continue to be treated as a valid public purpose under Ohio's eminent domain law. GOPC is echoing the calls of others and urging the Senate to remove this prohibition by deleting lines 17110 through 17133 of the House-passed budget or support the adoption of SC0134 to limit the application of the prohibition only to previous takings that were dismissed prior to January 1, 2024.

Conclusion

Chair Schaffer and members of the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide interested party testimony and for GOPC to share our views on what it will take to create the tools and policy environment Ohio needs to thrive in the years to come.