

Senate Transportation Committee
Interested Party Testimony, House Bill 54 (Stewart)
Jason Warner, Director of Strategic Engagement, Greater Ohio Policy Center
Thursday, February 27, 2025

Chair Patton, Vice Chair Schaffer, Ranking Member Antonio and members of the Senate Transportation Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present Interested Party Testimony on House Bill 54, the state transportation budget for fiscal years 2026 and 2027.

My name is Jason Warner. I am the Director of Strategic Engagement at the Greater Ohio Policy Center. GOPC is Ohio's leading advocate for urban revitalization and sustainable growth, advocating for policies that revitalize Ohio.

One issue GOPC advocates for is for a modern transportation and mobility network that is safe and reliable for users of all modes. Additionally, we disseminate best practices, information on funding, tools, and technical assistance to develop transportation networks that create vibrant, revitalized spaces in the cities and towns of Ohio.

The state of transportation in Ohio and what Ohioans need.

In the next 25 years, Ohio is projected to lose 5.7% of its 2020 population. This means that we will have fewer rate payers available to support the long-term maintenance costs of Ohio's highways and roadways. During this same 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 our urban job centers, will look at other states and expect Ohio to have a similar range of transportation options that are safe and convenient. If they cannot find it here, they will go where it can be found.

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.

Maintaining our built-out highway system and avoiding expansion projects.

Ohio's transportation system expanded greatly at the height of Ohio's manufacturing history and during a time of rapid suburbanization.

Today, Ohio's transportation system is built out, and the marginal gains expected from proposed new expansion projects will come at high costs for future generations. Now, and in the future, the state leaders must be responsible stewards of limited public dollars. Given our population

projections, we must prioritize maintaining our current highways and roadways at the highest levels possible, critically assess the cost and benefits of any new expansion project, and limit system expansion to only the most needed projects that show clear, long-term demand.

Protect lives and promote public health with safer streets.

Local governments and ODOT are making streets safer for vulnerable road users - cyclists, pedestrians, transit-users and buggy-users— as well as motorists. 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 deaths. In 2023 alone, Ohio rated higher in pedestrian deaths (151) than the national average (143.5).

Ohio must take a comprehensive approach to creating local roadways and mobility infrastructure that gives Ohioans of all ages and abilities more and safer transportation choices. Transportation investments that are appropriate to the local context will boost safety and convenience, support healthy lifestyles, and create vibrant places where people want to live, shop, and work.

We applaud the DeWine administration for the commitments it has made to continue to support safety programs at ODOT such as the Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP) and encourage the legislature to maintain this funding over the next two years.

Invest in public transportation.

Despite historic levels of funding in the last six years, public transportation systems are still struggling to get workers to jobs, and others like seniors and people with disabilities, to their destinations. In addition, 25 Ohio counties still have no public transportation services.

To ensure Ohio's prosperity, the state must continue to invest funds into public transportation. These investments will connect working Ohioans to jobs and critical services and preserve the independence of Ohioans who cannot or choose not to drive.

Support rail expansion.

Expanding passenger rail service in Ohio will increase connections between and within the state's regions and connect Ohio to the rest of the Midwest. Viable cross-state passenger rail will reduce the assumed need for roadway expansion and allow existing rail infrastructure to better support the increased demand for commercial and industrial freight logistics. As Ohio continues to study this critical expansion, we encourage the legislature to continue to show support for this effort.

Comments on the House-Passed Budget.

We appreciate the work the House has done in crafting a transportation budget proposal that includes several changes, which we see as needed investments. These transportation priorities include:

- Retained the Governor's recommended allocation for safety programs, totaling over \$400M for the biennium.
- Continued the Ohio Workforce Mobility Partnership Program and provides \$15M in each fiscal year to administer the program.
- 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.
- Repeals language from HB23 (135th GA) that required the construction of entrance and exit ramps on I-71 in Medina County and permits a traffic congestion management plan for that area.

However, there are two issues that GOPC has serious concerns with. We respectfully request the Senate address these two items as you develop the transportation budget.

#1 Concern: Regional Transportation Planning Organizations

HB54 removes \$5 million in each fiscal year, which otherwise would be used by Ohio's six Regional Transportation Planning Organizations. Among other responsibilities, the RTPOs oversee rural transportation planning projects. The earmark, which has been zeroed out by the House, has had a significant impact on Ohio's rural counties across Ohio. According to ODOT's 2024 RTPO Impact Report, the RTPO program has invested in 35 different projects across the state since FY2022. However, more than 180 requests remain unfunded, worth over \$112 million. In recent years, the expansion of this program has allowed Ohio to advance more projects for our rural communities. **It is in the state's best interest that this funding be restored by the Senate.**

#2 Concern: ODOT Study on Interstate Route 73

HB54 requires ODOT to conduct a feasibility study for an Interstate Route 73 corridor, primarily along current U.S. Route 23, stretching from Toledo to Chesapeake, Ohio, by December 31, 2026 and reserves \$2 million for the study.

The funding proposed for this study is unnecessary and duplicates work that has already been conducted and completed by ODOT just this month. On February 14, 2025, ODOT released the Strategic Transportation Development Analysis (STDA), which the General Assembly required in the last transportation budget in 2023. The STDA was a statewide analysis of priority corridors in the state and reviewed two of the major routes mandated by the House proposed study: U.S. 23 between Toledo and Columbus, and U.S. 23 between Columbus and the Kentucky/West Virginia borders.

The STDA found:

- The US 23 North Corridor Improvements plan recommended by ODOT in June 2024 is the most beneficial, cost effective, and feasible recommendation to address congestion and safety risks in the corridor. Therefore, **the 2025 STDA study does not recommend constructing an alternative freeway, due to the cost as well as minimal travel time reductions from such an alternative freeway.**

- The US 23 South Corridor does require a feasibility study that will examine how to increase capacity and manage access from I-270 to south of Circleville. However, the STDA notes that this will involve building consensus among impacted communities for projects that manage access. Such changes may include consolidating driveways and service roads and changing traffic signal operations.

Given that just two years ago the Legislature commissioned an analysis of future highway needs and the recent STDA study has provided clear recommendations for next steps, we believe we have far more urgent and pressing needs in transportation infrastructure development than a further study of this magnitude.

We strongly encourage the Senate to remove this provision from the bill.

Conclusion

Chair Patton and members of the Senate Transportation 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 an infrastructure system that gives Ohioans of all ages and abilities access to safe, reliable modes of transportation.