



Ohio Senate Transportation Committee House Bill 54 2026-2027 Biennial Transportation Budget

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Interested Party Testimony February 27, 2025

Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency (NOACA) Grace Gallucci, Executive Director and CEO

Chair Patton, Vice Chair Schaffer, Ranking Member Antonio, and members of the Senate Transportation Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on HB 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), the Ohio Legislature, and the Senate Transportation Committee 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 higher construction costs.

TRANSPORTATION SAFETY: NOACA especially applauds this budget'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 support 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.

INTERCHANGE POLICY: NOACA strongly supports language added in the House to repeal a provision of law enacted as part of HB 23 (the 2024-2025 Biennial Transportation Budget) and replace it with a study. This provision, 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.

This requirement is strongly opposed by many elected officials and residents in both Medina and Cuyahoga Counties. Moreover, the requirement 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, it 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.

Furthermore, ORC 5501.60 bypasses the federally established decision-making role of MPOs, like NOACA, on significant decisions pertaining to 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 regional approach.

NOACA's 48-member Board, comprised of local elected and appointed officials from throughout the five-county region, unanimously adopted Resolution 2023-045 to express opposition to ORC 5501.60. In that resolution, the NOACA Board also expressed strong support for House and Senate bills -- originally introduced in the 135th General Assembly and reintroduced in the 136th General Assembly (HB 9 and SB 31) -- to repeal this provision of law and instead require a comprehensive study to be performed by NOACA and ODOT, to examine the traffic congestion issues and make recommendations by December 2026.

NOACA's Board, in partnership with ODOT, recently entered into a contract to conduct this study along the I-71 subarea between Cuyahoga and Medina Counties. This study will assess current conditions, explore all 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.

However, if NOACA's Board does not believe the repeal of ORC 5510.60 is advancing in the Ohio Legislature, the planned study may be delayed. This study (as required under the House amendment language and the standalone bills to repeal ORC 5510.60) offers a path forward that is consistent with federal law regarding new or modified interchanges on the Interstate Highway System. In order for this study to provide objective and data-driven analysis as required by the FHWA, it must be conducted without the lingering bias imposed by ORC 5510.60. In other words, the study must start with a blank slate to enable an unbiased examination of all options, leading to recommendations that will comply with federal requirements. Repealing ORC 5510.60 is the best way to ensure that the study moves forward and results in recommendations that will withstand FHWA scrutiny.

PASSENGER RAIL: 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 strongly supports the expansion of



passenger rail opportunities as one of its top legislative/policy priorities, and we stand ready to work with the Ohio Rail Development Commission and other entities to advance these proposed new routes, including through funding that may be proposed in this budget or future budgets.

With that in mind, NOACA supports language added in the House to adopt the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Compact (MIPRC), which creates the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission, and earmarks \$25,000 in each fiscal year to pay for the costs associated with joining the compact. Rejoining the MIPRC will give Ohio a seat at the table regarding passenger rail planning and funding that impacts Ohio and its neighboring states. Adopting the MIPRC is a priority for NOACA and we support this amendment.

TRANSIT: 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 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 the 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.

Moreover, NOACA strongly appreciates and supports the House amendment to provide \$15 million annually for the Ohio Regional Workforce Mobility Partnership Program. This program, which was included in the last biennial budget, represents an important investment in workforce mobility that supports job creation, workforce retention, and talent recruitment in Ohio.

E-CHECK: I would also like to comment on the House amendment to make changes to the E-check emissions testing program in Ohio. While NOACA supports efforts to improve the efficiency, convenience, and affordability of the E-check program, we would respectfully ask the Committee to ensure that any changes to the program do not undermine the region's ability to improve air quality and achieve compliance with the federal Clean Air Act. We stand ready to work with all parties to improve the program in ways that facilitate continuous air quality improvement for the health and well-being of residents, and support continued economic growth in Northeast Ohio.

TRANSPORTATION REVENUE: Finally, I would just note that NOACA supported



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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, ODOT, and the Ohio Legislature to improve the state's ability to adequately fund our 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, the Ohio Legislature, and the Senate Transportation Committee 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.