



PROPONENT TESTIMONY – Am. Sub. House Bill 54

March 4, 2025

The Ohio Senate Transportation Committee

Chairman Patton, Vice Chair Schaffer, and Ranking Member Antonio, thank you and the members of this committee for the opportunity to present testimony on the FY '26-'27 transportation budget.

The Ohio Railroad Association is pleased to support Amended Substitute HB 54's language continuing Ohio's dedicated investments in grade crossing safety. In addition, the Association expresses our strong support for the outstanding work of the staff of the Ohio Rail Development Commission (ORDC) on both grade crossing safety and rail transportation infrastructure development. The Association also supports the addition of language amending the state's wayside detector statutes in HB 54.

Railroad-Highway Grade Crossing Safety

Since the late 1980s, comprehensive efforts to eliminate crashes at highway-rail grade crossings have produced a decline from nearly 900 per year to less than 80 for 2024 (based on available data). The decline in the number of crashes can be traced to decades of diligent work to install, maintain, and upgrade warning devices, eliminate at-grade crossings through closure or grade separation, and driver education for the traveling public. Ohio has slightly less than 5,200 miles of railroad tracks with approximately 5,600 public at-grade highway crossings intersecting those tracks, many of the crossings just a short distance apart. While crashes have been dramatically reduced, Ohio continues to see roughly 80% of crashes happen at crossings with active warning devices.

House Bill 54 maintains funding for the Rail Commission's grade crossing safety improvement program at prior years' levels. We want to recognize the longstanding and bipartisan support for this effort over the past four decades. This program will continue to primarily focus on the upgrade of passive warning devices (crossbucks) to active warning devices (lights and gates and/or from flashing lights to lights and gates). A separate program created in the previous transportation budget in 2023 and also managed by the ORDC provides limited funding to assist communities where an overpass or underpass eliminates the grade crossing, an infrastructure safety project that delivers additional benefits to a community.

Ohio Rail Development Commission

The ORDC, instituted in 1994, has grown into one of the most highly regarded state rail organizations in the nation. The ORDC has established a reputation for excellence at one of the most important partner agencies Ohio could have, the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA). The FRA oversees both rail safety and rail infrastructure programs. The ORDC has partnered with Ohio railroads and rail-served communities to access tens of millions of dollars in extremely competitive FRA-managed programs. The most recent grants, announced late last year, totaled more than \$81 million to assist with the construction of four grade separations (Circleville, Hudson, North Ridgeville, and Delaware County). The total cost for these four projects is roughly \$125 million. Without the funding that several current members of this Committee helped to restore in the 2023 Transportation Budget, the millions of federal dollars awarded for these Ohio projects would have gone to other states.

The ORDC's rail development program is funded through the state's Operating Budget (GRF). These funds are employed to partner with businesses that want to establish or improve their rail service or for short line railroad infrastructure improvements. When possible, the ORDC has also been remarkably successful in leveraging these state funds to again win competitive federal awards, maximizing the impact of their limited GRF funding while making significant improvements to Ohio's freight rail network. In the last decade, the ORDC has won more than \$80 million in federal infrastructure grants in support of 14 different projects.

Wayside Detectors

Following the East Palestine derailment in February 2023, the General Assembly mandated broad requirements for wayside detectors on all railroads, large and small. Detectors, located along the tracks, provide information on the operations of rail equipment and parts of that equipment. There were no specific federal regulations in place on this subject, and Ohio was in the vanguard imposing such statutes. Upon review, the statutes failed to recognize the different operating characteristics of Ohio's smaller railroad operations. Small railroads have vastly different operating characteristics from the largest railroads, most notably in train speed, volume of freight, and the length of the freight move. Many of these railroads have less than fifty (50) miles of track and travel at speeds below 30 miles per hour, often much slower.

Senator Bill Reineke, the chair of the Senate Select Committee on Rail Safety, in consultation with Ohio's short line railroads and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, introduced legislation in the previous General Assembly (SB 250) that proposed to establish more appropriate distancing requirements for smaller railroads. This proposal received two hearings in the Senate Transportation Committee in 2024. There was no opposition presented to this limited proposal. The House included this language in their substitute bill, and we hope the Senate will agree to its inclusion. Ohio railroads will be adding dozens of detectors in the coming year. And, based on available information, Ohio will have more wayside detectors across all classes of railroads than any other state.

Thank you for your interest in this testimony. The Ohio Railroad Association urges the Committee's support for the freight rail-related items in the bill.