

Senate Transportation Committee
Interested Party Testimony, House Bill 54 (Stewart)
Jason Warner, Director of Strategic Engagement, Greater Ohio Policy Center
Friday, March 14, 2025

Chair Patton, Vice Chair Schaffer, Ranking Member Antonio and members of the Senate Transportation Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to share our thoughts on proposed Senate changes to the state transportation budget.

Elimination of GRF Appropriations in the Transportation Budget.

GOPC understands and respects the desire to shift funding appropriated from the General Revenue Fund (GRF) out of the transportation budget and into the main operating budget. As long-time advocates for funding public transportation, we would appreciate assurances from the Senate that the decision to make this change is more of an accounting measure and out of a desire to keep GRF within the context of the main operating budget.

Assurances that the following proposed funding allocations from the House-passed transportation budget will not be adjusted in the main operating budget would be appreciated.

We respectfully request that the following appropriations remain in place in the Main Operating Budget going forward:

- GRF 775470: Public Transportation State - \$37,500,000 per year
- GRF 772422: Workforce Mobility Partnership - \$15,000,000 per year
- GRF 772422: Private Voucher Pilot Program - \$1,000,000 in FY26
- GRF 771411: Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Compact - \$25,000 per year

Regional Transportation Planning Organizations

The House version of HB54 removes \$5 million in each fiscal year, which otherwise would be used by Ohio's six Regional Transportation Planning Organizations. We are grateful that the Senate has acted to restore this funding in the substitute bill.

Among other responsibilities, the RTPOs oversee rural transportation planning projects.. According to ODOT's 2024 RTPO Impact Report, the RTPO program has invested in 35 different projects across the state's rural counties 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.

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.

It is for these reasons that we continue to stand opposed to the following provisions introduced by the House-version in HB54 and modified or retained by the Senate substitute bill:

- Elimination of the repeal of provisions from HB23 (135th General Assembly) which would require ODOT to construct an entrance and exit ramps on I-71 in Medina County. The House version of the bill would permit a traffic congestion management plan for that area.
- Retention of House-passed language related to a study of the development of a limited access highway designated Interstate 73 from the Cities of Toledo to Chesapeake, Ohio. Though the Senate bill reduces the funding for the study to \$1.5 million from \$2 million, GOPC continues to believe the recently completed ODOT Strategic Transportation Development Analysis (STDA), published on February 14, 2025, provides all the needed study for this possible corridor project.
- Added language requiring a study by ODOT and the Ohio Turnpike and Infrastructure Commission (OTIC) regarding a connector road linking U.S. 23 and Interstate 71 in Delaware County. Our concerns with this proposal mirror our concern with the I-73 study. While we appreciate that this study would require an examination of how to pay for such a roadway, we remain concerned about the long-term cost of maintaining a new roadway in light of the statement of ODOT that dwindling revenues make it difficult to maintain the existing roadway infrastructure pipeline beyond 2028.

We strongly encourage the committee to restore House-passed language regarding the I-71 Interchange in Medina County and to remove proposed highway expansion studies from the bill.

Conclusion

Members of the Senate Transportation Committee, thank you for once again providing GOPC the opportunity 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 and helps create vibrant communities.
