



March 2, 2021

The Honorable Scott Oelslager
Chairman, Ohio House Finance Committee

Dear Chairman Oelslager:

With nearly 2,100 members, the Columbus Chamber serves as the voice of small businesses across the 11-county Columbus region.

We write in regards to two provisions of interest under House Bill 74, the Ohio Fiscal Year 22-23 Transportation Budget: increased transit funding and retention of language to make distracted driving a primary offense.

Public Transit Funding Restoration

The Columbus Chamber applauds the House Finance Committee's inclusion of Rep. Carfagna's amendment in the substitute bill to restore public transit funding. We respectfully request retention of this language throughout future iterations of the legislation.

Here in the Columbus region, the business community views access to reliable and efficient transportation as a workforce issue. When an employee is late to work or forced to call off due to unreliable transportation options, this results in decreased productivity and increased cost to the business. When a candidate or employee does not have reliable access, the lack of transportation serves as a barrier to employment. In the seven industry sectors the Chamber is actively tracking, there are currently 23,119 in-demand jobs available. We ask the General Assembly to implement public policy solutions that will help *increase* labor force participation, such as increased investment in public transit.

Increased state investment in transit will improve our economic development efforts by allowing the state to demonstrate our competitiveness in this space. Businesses hoping to relocate to the region frequently ask about public transit options. Further, according to Insight 2050, the Columbus region is expected to add a million additional people over the next 30 years. Understandably, a topic of increasingly important stature amongst local elected officials, business leaders, and community partners, is how we successfully plan for that growth. Public transit is at the forefront of those conversations. We ask for the Legislature to be a partner in this effort, recognizing that a strong capital city benefits the entire state.

COTA is a close partner of the business community. They are responsive to our needs and aligned in our goals. Their strategic service model also connects downtown Columbus to surrounding areas, even



including rural communities. They are good stewards of the taxpayer's funds, which is why we have supported passage of the Franklin County levy to boost local transit funding for many years.

Just as government programs such as the Paycheck Protection Program and the Ohio Small Business Relief Grant were successful in stabilizing small businesses, the same is true of the emergency assistance provided to transit agencies. In both instances, this cash infusion served as a lifeline and was utilized rapidly. It is simply inaccurate to characterize pandemic relief funding as a sufficient funding stream for the next biennium. Just as small businesses must regain traditional revenue streams in order to survive and thrive, the same is true of our partner transit agencies, with GRF and designated federal flex dollars serving as integral for their ongoing success.

Inclusion of Distracted Driving Provisions

The Columbus Chamber urges the House Finance Committee to reconsider reinstatement of language included in Governor DeWine's executive budget to make distracted driving a primary offense for adults. Additionally, the Chamber is supportive of an amendment to prevent future racial discrimination in the law's application by requiring transparency in the reporting of local data with regards to the race of the individual accused of using an electronic device while driving.

Recent data is shocking, and bears repeating: In 2018, more than 2,800 people nationwide were killed in crashes involving a distracted driver, and nearly 400,000 more were injured. According to the Ohio State Highway Patrol, more than 91,000 distracted driving crashes occurred in Ohio from 2013 through 2019, resulting in more than 47,000 injuries and 305 deaths. In 2020, travel in Ohio was down approximately 17% yet traffic deaths rose. Ohio ended 2020 with 1,237 traffic deaths—82 more than the 1,155 reported in 2019. This rise is directly correlated to more people now having smartphones, leading to an increase in active distraction while behind the wheel. Reducing this active distraction will help save lives.

Protecting lives is of the utmost importance to the business community for a myriad of reasons. First and foremost, the Columbus Chamber and our members strive to play an active role in fostering a thriving community. That mission simply cannot be achieved when lives are lost prematurely. Human capital is the foundation of a strong economy.

Chamber member businesses are working hard to make safe driving a priority for their employees, and are actively advocating for technology to help drivers better manage phone use and ensure wireless technology does not become an unnecessary distraction behind the wheel. Many businesses with vehicle fleets already have distracted driving policies in place but do not all have the technological capabilities to ensure adherence by employees. Further, with a patchwork of distracted driving ordinances across the state, compliance is often complicated. The state could serve as a partner to the business community in consistently enforcing the law and encouraging a life-saving behavior change.



Very practically speaking, decreased accidents place downward pressure on insurance rates, and rising crashes and deaths on our roadways increase the cost of doing business and impede the flow of goods and services. With the Columbus region serving as a global transportation hub and leader in smart mobility, it is essential that our state laws reflect our drive for economic competitiveness in this arena. Joining the 46 other states that have already enacted primary enforcement is one certain way of doing so.

And recent polling data released by the Fix Our Roads Ohio Coalition, of which the Columbus Chamber is a member, demonstrates strong support for the law, along with strong commitment to obey it.

For the aforementioned reasons, the Columbus Chamber urges your attention to these two issues.

Thank you.

Sincerely,
Holly Gross
Vice President of Government Relations
Columbus Chamber of Commerce

Cc: Members of the House Finance Committee
Columbus Region Legislative Delegation