

TESTIMONY OF THE OHIO RAILROAD ASSOCIATION

MARCH 8, 2021

OHIO SENATE TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE CONSIDERATION OF HOUSE BILL 74

Chairman Kunze, Vice-Chairman Reineke, Ranking Member Antonio, and members of the Senate Transportation Committee, thank you for this opportunity to present the Ohio freight railroad industry's comments on House Bill 74. The state's freight rail industry is providing testimony in support of the sections pertaining to the Ohio Rail Development Commission, with a specific focus on the grade crossing safety program funding.

GRADE CROSSING SAFETY

HB 74 bill proposes to provide approximately \$15 million per year for public grade crossing safety programs. (Grade crossings are the at-grade intersections between railroad tracks and roadways. Millions of Ohioans use these public crossings every day. In Ohio, there is more than one public at-grade crossing for every mile of railroad track.)

According to the Ohio Rail Development Commission (ORDC), this funding is provided through federal funds allocated specifically for grade crossing safety purposes. They are primarily reserved for the construction of or improvements to the warning devices and signals designed to alert motorists as they are approaching grade crossings. (Under current state law, the freight railroad operators are responsible for the engineering and installation, plus the costs of annual maintenance, of the increasingly complex and expensive warning devices. Railroads are also generally responsible for the crossing surfaces.) The General Assembly has a long record of support for grade crossing safety, and we urge your continued support for this line item.

According to the Ohio State Rail Plan

(<http://www.dot.state.oh.us/Divisions/Rail/Documents/State%20of%20Ohio%20Rail%20Plan%20Final.pdf>), Ohio has almost 5,800 public grade crossings, the fourth most in the nation, behind Texas, Illinois, and California. Ohio has approximately 5,200 miles of railroad tracks, creating a situation where there is more than one public grade crossing for every mile of railroad track in Ohio. Ohio's rail system is more densely built than almost any other state's freight rail network, and that is a tribute to its importance and use to Ohio's economy. If Ohio businesses did not use rail, Ohio would not have so much.

The combined long-term and dedicated efforts of the parties actively involved (including law enforcement, railroads, state government, local government, federal agencies, Operation Lifesaver, and countless volunteers) in improving grade crossing safety have reduced the annual total grade crossing crashes in Ohio from 264 in 1992 to 68 in 2019. This roughly 75% reduction in crashes is more impressive when you consider that in 1992, there were less than 7 million vehicles registered in Ohio; by

2019, the number of registered vehicles had nearly doubled to about 13.7 million. Rail business has also increased during this period while the number of grade crossings has been reduced only very slightly.

The funding provided for public grade crossing safety improvements (numbering in the millions of dollars and thousands of crossings over the past several decades) has clearly been significantly beneficial for public safety. This is a success story, with countless lives saved. And these previous safety investments will continue to save lives in the future.

However, a persistent and troubling aspect of grade crossing safety is the fact that roughly 80% or more of the grade crossing crashes in recent years occur where the public authorities have installed active warning devices (lights and gates; for example, in 2017, 56 of the 68 crashes were at locations with gates and/or flashing lights). This is not just an Ohio issue. National efforts are focused on investigating this situation and searching for a solution to further reduce overall crashes, and the persistently high percentage occurring at what should be the least hazardous crossings.

DISTRACTED DRIVING

The Ohio Railroad Association is a member of Governor DeWine's Traffic Safety Council, led by the Ohio Department of Public Safety. Like other members of the Council, we want to add our support for language in the as introduced version of HB 74 that would encourage the reduction of distracted driving behavior. The hundreds of millions of public dollars spent to ensure every driver is as safe as possible are devalued when drivers are looking down at a phone instead of up at the road ahead. I am sure you have seen the shocking numbers associated with distracted driving, and we all continue to see reports of crashes, including crashes at grade crossings, where distracted driving was believed to be the proximate cause. We encourage Ohio to join the many other states that have such laws on their books.

Thank you for your consideration of this testimony.

Sincerely,

Art Arnold

Executive Director
The Ohio Railroad Association