



**Ohio Department of Public Safety  
Testimony of Director Thomas Stickrath  
Transportation Budget Bill  
Senate Transportation Committee  
February 24, 2021**

Chair Kunze, Vice Chair Reineke, Ranking Member Antonio, and Members of the Senate Transportation Committee: I am honored to serve as the Director of the Ohio Department of Public Safety. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Department's portion of the Transportation Budget Bill to fund the operations of three of the Department's six divisions, the Ohio State Highway Patrol, the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles, and the Division of Emergency Medical Services. I do look forward to talking about our other divisions and initiatives including RecoveryOhio, the Ohio Narcotics Intelligence Center, the Ohio School Safety Center, the Ohio Traffic Safety Council, among others, at a later time.

I'd like to begin by providing members of the committee a high-level overview of our Department and its priorities. Following my testimony, both I and members of my Senior Staff are open to answering any questions that the members of the committee may have.

It is difficult to discuss our divisions without thinking about the pandemic in which we are still living. Our agency has been profoundly impacted by COVID-19 and, in some cases, our agency has had quite an impact.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Bureau of Motor Vehicles (BMV) temporarily closed Deputy Registrar agencies and Driver License examination stations effective March 19, 2020. As a result of that decision, driver license, identification card, and vehicle registration expiration dates were extended twice thanks to the General Assembly, first through December of 2020, then again through April of 2021. Despite all of this, both Deputy Registrar agencies and Driver License examination stations are extremely resilient, and significantly changed processes and procedures to protect the safety of both customers and staff. We are happy to report that Deputy Registrar businesses reopened on May 26, 2020, and have processed more than nine million transactions. Driver License examination stations resumed offering driving skills tests on June 16, 2020, and have conducted more than 330,000 modified driving tests.

Throughout the pandemic, our Division of Emergency Medical Services (EMS) has been engaged with the activation of the State Emergency Operations Center for the state's coordinated COVID-19 response. Similar to the BMV, certification eligibility deadlines for applicants, as well as fire and EMS certification expiration dates, were extended twice under the General Assembly's guidance. EMS remains integral in coordinating and disseminating vaccine information to first responders.

The Ohio State Highway Patrol modified its primary focus to provide essential assistance to local communities and meet the needs of our public safety partners. I know Colonel Fambro will be sharing more on that soon.

Moving on to our current funding situation... when I appeared before this committee two years ago, I explained the structural deficiency that we have had with funding the Patrol and the BMV for quite some time.

Prior to FY04, the Patrol was principally funded by the gas tax, but that revenue source was phased-out and redirected to ODOT. I should note, we received zero dollars of the gas tax increase and zero dollars of the new hybrid/electric vehicle fees enacted last budget. In FY04, the Patrol's primary funding began to transition to motor vehicle registration fees, which brought in substantial revenue and sustained the Patrol for many years.

Of the cost of an annual registration fee paid at one of our Deputy Registrar locations, the Department receives approximately \$14.50 – the same amount since 2003. For example, of the \$66 per year that a resident of the City of Columbus pays to renew their registration, only approximately \$14.50 goes to the Department. Quite frankly, we are in a hole. Last year, the hole was about \$51 million, but fortunately we were able to work with OBM and the General Assembly to obtain a one-time infusion of \$35 million in GRF and a shift of \$16 million from operating expenses to capital expenses. As you know, utilizing ever increasing amounts of GRF to fill a structural deficit is not sustainable.

As I promised you two years ago, we have been very thoughtful about our spending within our agency and have been living within our means. Despite those efforts, next fiscal year (FY '22), we will face an additional \$44 million shortfall, then \$89 million in FY 23; and exponentially higher in years that follow.

To address these gaps, we are proposing a \$10 increase on all commercial and non-commercial vehicles and trailers. This increase will provide sufficient funding for an estimated 10 years.

We are also proposing a \$2 auto title fee increase (\$15 to \$17 dollars) on non-dealer-to-dealer transactions solely to support the Patrol's non-highway enforcement fund. The BMV is not impacted by the \$2 fee increase whatsoever.

Historically, within the Patrol, our goal is to have 1,600 uniformed troopers and supervisors; we are currently at 1,539. Typically, we have two Academy new-hire classes each year to maintain this number. Preserving these staffing levels is incredibly important to ensure we continue our enforcement and education efforts relating to four specific threats we face on our roadways - impaired drivers, illegal drugs, highway crime, and distracted driving.

Last calendar year, we only had one Academy class due to hiring restrictions. We currently do not have any classes scheduled this fiscal year, but depending on the availability of funding that we are asking for, we could have a class in July.

The non-highway enforcement fund covers costs associated with security at state properties, policing at the State Fair and Expo Center, investigations of crimes occurring at state properties including within prisons, executive protection including the Governor and others, and special details necessitated by civil unrest. This fund has experienced chronic shortages of cash, requiring us to seek assistance from the Controlling Board Emergency Purposes and Contingencies Fund three times because expenses have exceeded revenues. Colonel Fambro will go into more detail on this during his testimony.

Despite the challenges, I am happy to say that the BMV has made incredible strides in increasing efficiency and improving customer service. Together with Lt. Governor Husted and InnovateOhio, the BMV launched its online queuing system at Deputy Registrar agencies across the state, called “Get in Line, Online.” The system allows customers to use a smartphone or computer to remotely reserve their place in line at their local license agency. After checking in, customers can spend their time as they wish, not physically waiting at the BMV, and can show up later that day to claim their spot in line. Customers can also see live wait times online, assisting them in deciding which Deputy Registrar agency to visit and when.

Just as important as “Get in Line, Online”, the BMV telecommunications overhaul reduced telephone wait times by 88 percent (with nearly half of all calls being answered in less than 60 seconds). When I became Director, the average telephone hold time was over 25 minutes. This was unacceptable, and the BMV revamped its telecommunications unit by rearranging call trees, changing message prompts, and making sure customers were aware of online services they could complete themselves with no wait, as well as shifting personnel to better address high call volume days and times, and instituting an interactive voice response system to get people where they need to be quicker. After these changes took place, the average hold time was reduced to just over three minutes.

And I think it is important to note that we have accomplished this while the BMV has been reduced to its lowest level of staffing in recent history.

Turning now to the Division of Emergency Medical Services, EMS certifies more than 55,000 fire and emergency medical service providers in Ohio. The Division also certifies all Ohio fire and EMS instructors, provides chartering and accreditation of fire and EMS training, and regulates medical transportation services. The Division continues to be integral in the COVID-19 response. Many rural and volunteer EMS agencies continue to rely on funding assistance through the EMS Grants Program for training and equipment. In 2020, a specific PPE reimbursement fund was established to help these agencies offset the unforeseen and significant operational cost increases for PPE as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In closing, I will just reiterate our need for a long-term, sustainable funding source to maintain the current level of service. Revenue increases are never easy, but we are committed to working collaboratively with the General Assembly to ensure that these critical services continue – services on which the community and our local, state, and federal partners have come to rely for the safety and security of Ohioans.

Speaking of the safety of Ohioans, I would be remiss if I did not mention an important piece of this transportation budget bill that addresses the serious issue of distracted driving. I first want to thank you, Chair Kunze, for your leadership on this issue during the last General Assembly by sponsoring Senate Bill 285. I look forward to your continued support and joining alongside the Governor in an effort to keep Ohioans safe. The bottom line is that Ohio has not gone far enough to change the culture behind the wheel. We are one of four states that do not have a primary enforcement distracted driving law and I believe that this provision will undoubtedly save lives.

Chair Kunze, Vice Chair Reineke, Ranking Member Antonio and members of the committee, thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I am looking forward to working with each of you in the months ahead. At this time, with your permission, I would like to turn it over to Colonel Fambro to share highlights from his testimony on the Ohio State Highway Patrol. Following the Colonel's testimony, we are happy to answer any questions from the members of the committee.