



PATRICK T. GINNETTI, P.E., P.S.
MAHONING COUNTY ENGINEER

Joint Committee on Force Accounts
Patrick Ginnetti, P.E., P.S., Mahoning County Engineer
FORCE ACCOUNT Limits Increase - SUPPORT
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Good morning Co-chair Roegner, Co-Chair Johnson, and members of the Joint Committee on Force Accounts, and thank you for the opportunity to provide support testimony for force account increase. Although each county has differences (i.e. union, non-union, rural, urban, etc.), each county also has similarities in the type of work that can be accomplished with its own forces.

Force account limits have been the same since 2003, yet material costs have risen approximately 96% since that time according to the National Highway Construction Cost Index. Asphalt costs in Mahoning County ranged from \$31.00 - \$35.00 per ton in 2003 to \$55.00 - \$82.00 per ton in 2020. This increase in materials alone makes it extremely difficult to stay within the allowable limits on even simple road repairs. The increase in force account limits would permit the county to continue to perform work on the smaller emergency projects and routine repair projects that need completed while allowing local contractors to perform the larger scale projects.

The proposed increase in force account limits is not to be mistaken as an increase in the annual budgets of the County Engineers. This increase is not an influx of money, rather it would enable the counties to perform the necessary work on our roadways and bridges. Most (if not all) County Engineers are running their offices with fewer staff members than were employed a decade ago. Mahoning County for example, had 123 employees in 2003 (31 non-union and 82 union employees) compared to 68 today (21 non-union and 47 union employees). That is a difference of 57 employees in less than 2 decades. In fact, Mahoning County has ten fewer employees than in 2013.

County Highway Departments are funded primarily by a share of the state fuel tax, motor vehicle registration fees and state and federal grants. County Highway budgets are fixed. They are constrained by their revenue sources. Limiting the availability of a county to use their own existing work force and equipment is an inefficient use of those resources. I am proud of my team and employee's ability to adapt to doing more with less as a result of stagnant budgets.

Private sector contractors are some of our most valuable partners. We couldn't make the kind of improvements demanded by our growing community without them. County Engineers are charged with the "Construction, reconstruction, improvement, maintenance, and repair of all bridges and highways within the engineer's county, under the jurisdiction of the board of county commissioners" (ORC 5543.01). In doing so, we employ a work force and maintain a fleet to provide the basic services related to owning and maintaining a local highway system.

We are not asking to expand our role, increase our staff or expand our fleet of equipment. We are simply asking for the latitude to make decisions about the use of these existing resources in a way that maximizes the efficiency of taxpayer dollars. I strongly support increases in the county force account limits that have been eroded by construction cost inflation over the last 18 years.

Again, this proposal is not a budget increase. We are attempting to perform the work that we are statutorily obligated to perform in order to provide a safe roadway network for the traveling public. All Counties have work not being completed that should be. The current force account limits are restraining our ability to make the kind of improvements demanded by our communities and tax payers.

