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Week in Review

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AGRICULTURE

Gov. Mike DeWine and his nominee for Ohio Department of Agriculture (ODAg) director, former Rep. Brian Baldrige (R-Winchester), joined Ohio Farm Bureau Federation (OFBF) Executive Vice President Adam Sharp at a "fireside chat" event during this year's Ag Day at the Capital Wednesday. Baldrige was nominated in January, pending Senate confirmation. He and DeWine discussed plans to expand the H2Ohio program across Ohio in detail. Baldrige said it is a "top priority" for the department and discussed how he has seen ODAg staff's passion for it. DeWine also told reporters after the event that the H2Ohio program is proven and needs to be expanded, which his budget proposal would support.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

Ohio joins Pennsylvania in separate agreements with DNA Diagnostics Center requiring the Fairfield company to pay a \$200,000 fine and implement a new cybersecurity program after a 2021 data breach that compromised the personal information of more than 45,000 consumers, the Ohio Attorney General's Office announced Thursday. DNA Diagnostics provides paternity and other genetic testing.

BUDGET – F.Y. 24-25

Informal hearings on the State Operating Budget were in full swing this week at the Ohio House. Below are a few highlights included in the executive budget proposal and from committee hearings over the past week:

Sports betting proprietors would be required to pay a 20 percent tax on sports gaming receipts under Gov. Mike DeWine's executive budget proposal. The current tax rate, established by 134-HB29 (Wiggam-A. Miller), is 10 percent. Another provision in the budget would clarify that sports gamblers who threaten athletes will be banned from participating in Ohio's sports betting industry.

Interim State Superintendent Stephanie Siddens Monday took members of the State Board of Education (SBOE) on a deep dive of the governor's recently released FY24-25 state budget recommendations, which she noted went "above and beyond" what even members had recommended for funding of the Ohio Department of Education (ODE). Siddens discussed how the investments fit in with the department's priorities coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, which it has dubbed the Future Forward Ohio initiative. Siddens called the two proposals "incredibly aligned," adding that "the dollar figures go above and beyond what the board recommended, so the areas of focus are consistent, and the priority programs are as well." According to ODE Budget Chief Aaron Rausch, the governor's FY24 budget recommendation represents a 6.9 percent increase in funding, and the FY25 recommendation represents an additional 1.9 percent increase. In total, the governor's FY24-25 budget would spend an additional \$1.56 billion in General Revenue Fund (GRF) and Lottery Profits Education Fund (LPEF) dollars on primary and secondary education in the state, Rausch said.

During budget testimony before the House Finance Health and Human Services Subcommittee, State Medical Board of Ohio (SMBO) Executive Director Stephanie Loucka said the board has made progress on the issue after increasing its staff during the last budget, but more employees are needed. The proposed SMBO budget would total \$13.8 million in FY24 (a 6.8 percent increase over the FY23 estimate) and \$14.3 million in FY25 (a 3.8 percent increase over FY24).

Under the executive budget proposal, the Ohio Board of Psychology would receive \$747,489 in FY24 (a 4.4 percent increase over FY23) and \$757,489 in FY25 (a 1.3 percent increase over FY24). Ohio Board of Psychology Executive Director Ronald Ross said the proposal represents the "projected minimal funding to allow the psychology board to meet its basic obligations."

Included in the executive budget proposal, the Ohio Chemical Dependency Professionals Board is set to receive \$925,837 in FY24 (a 6.8 percent increase over FY23) and \$998,387 in FY25 (a 7.9 percent increase over FY24). Ohio Chemical Dependency Professionals Board Executive Director Jill Smock said the board needs more funding than requested in the executive budget: \$112,000 for FY24 and \$97,400 for FY25, and to hire an additional staff position.

Additionally, under the executive budget proposal, the Ohio State Chiropractic Board would receive \$592,868 in FY24 (a 7.8 percent decrease from FY23) and \$593,868 in FY25 (a 0.2 percent increase from FY24). This reflects a decrease from the current biennial level of funding, Ohio State Chiropractic Board Executive Director Elizabeth Moore said.

The House Finance Public Safety Subcommittee Tuesday heard budget testimony from Court of Claims Court Clerk Anderson Renick, who said the court's FY24-25 budget proposes a "modest increase" for statutory and cost-of-living payroll increases covering employee benefits and program charge-backs, as required by the Ohio Department of Administrative Services (DAS) and the Office of Budget and Management (OBM). Renick said the FY24 request of \$4,603,356 is a 6 percent increase over FY23 and the FY25 request of \$4,787,931, a 4 percent increase over FY24.

The House Finance Public Safety Subcommittee Tuesday also heard from Ohio Board of Pharmacy Executive Director Steve Schierholt, who said the board will continue to rely on licensure fees and federal grants in FY24-25 in order to enforce state drug laws and rules, regulate providers and continue to improve the Ohio Automated Rx Reporting System (OARRS) at no cost to prescribers and pharmacists. Schierholt said provider requests for patient reports through OARRS have increased from 65,000 per weekday in 2016 to more than one million per weekday in 2022.

The Ohio History Connection (OHC) would receive a 48 percent increase in General Revenue Fund (GRF) dollars in FY24 over the estimated total for FY23 under Gov. Mike DeWine's budget proposal, according to the agency Redbook. OHC would receive \$22.9 million in FY24, compared to the estimated \$15.6 million in FY23. The agency would receive \$26.2 million in FY25, a 14 percent increase over FY24. During her testimony to the House Finance Higher Education Subcommittee on Tuesday, OHC Executive Director Megan Wood said much of the proposed increase in funding will go toward items that don't specifically involve OHC. However, she acknowledged her agency would still see a significant increase in funding under the proposal.

The Ohio Arts Council (OAC) would receive \$20.4 million in General Revenue Funds (GRF) in both FY24 and FY25, for a total of \$40.8 million under the executive budget proposal. The agency received an estimated \$20.1 million in GRF dollars in FY23.

The Legislature should increase funding for programs to address diabetes and infant mortality in communities of color, Ohio Commission on Minority Health (OCMH) Executive Director Angela Dawson said Wednesday in budget testimony before the House Finance Health and Human Services Subcommittee. She said her agency is seeking to expand a diabetes prevention program in Cleveland to two more counties.

Under the executive budget proposal, the Ohio Board of Nursing (OBN) would receive \$14.6 million in FY24 (a 0.7 percent increase over FY23) and \$13.9 million in FY25 (a 4.3 percent decrease compared to FY24).

Additionally, the Counselor, Social Worker, and Marriage and Family Therapist (CSWMFT) Board would receive about \$4 million over the biennium, representing a slight increase from FY23.

Ranking Minority Member Adam Miller (D-Columbus) continued to question Wednesday whether state agencies before the House Finance Subcommittee on Public Safety are seeking adequate funds to do their job. The Joint Legislative Ethics Committee (JLEC) and State Employee Relations Board (SERB) both requested flat-level budgets, though Miller told the former that "unprecedented numbers" of lobbyists seeking registration this biennium appear to warrant more dollars. JLEC Executive Director Tony Bledsoe, the legislative inspector general, told the subcommittee most of his \$625,000 budget proposal in each of FY24-25 will go toward regulating what historically has averaged 1,300 registered lobbyists in Ohio. The request also includes spending authority for \$150,000 in lobbying fees and \$10,000 from JLEC's Investigative Financial Disclosure Fund.

The House Finance Higher Education Subcommittee Wednesday heard testimony from the Capitol Square Review and Advisory Board (CSRAB), State Library Board, Ohio Elections Commission (OEC) and Ohio State Cosmetology and Barber Board. CSRAB Executive Director Laura Battocletti said the budget provides flat funding in FY24 and FY25, and discussed future needs for furniture replacement, as well as increased costs on custodial supplies. She also described how 30 percent of fulltime staff are eligible for retirement within five years. Battocletti said it has been difficult to hire qualified technicians and custodial staff, as they can receive higher pay elsewhere, though CSRAB employment provides state health care and retirement system benefits.

OEC Executive Director Philip Richter told the subcommittee there have been over 22,000 cases filed and 79 advisory opinions issued since the commission became an independent state agency. He said the nine people on the OEC payroll consume over 80 percent of the total budget and they see a "steady caseload" regarding campaign finance. Their operational needs are "fairly consistent," though there have been rising prices for postage and increased health insurance premiums. The budget would provide a "very limited increase" for the OEC that is less than what Richter initially requested, at \$625,000 rather than \$664,000. He added that allows them to maintain basic operations with one fewer employee than in the past. That employee had been part-time, and he said the initial request anticipated their re-hiring.

Lori Pearson, executive director of the Ohio State Cosmetology and Barber Board, said the board administered 15,462 examinations for barbering, cosmetology, and the branches of cosmetology in FY22, with 11,998 of them being first-time candidates. She said those who pass can purchase and receive their license the same day and gave the subcommittee an overview of the board's regulatory work. It is requesting \$5.42 million in FY24 and \$5.49 million in FY25. Compared to FY23, FY24 is a 7.3 percent decrease and FY25 is a 1.3 percent increase.

CORONAVIRUS

Saying "an orderly transition" is needed as the U.S. ends its national emergency over COVID-19, U.S. President Joe Biden continued it beyond March 1 but said he anticipates ending it on Thursday, May 11. The emergency was declared in March 2020 by former President Donald Trump. Biden said the nation is now in a "different phase" of its response and the administration is planning to end the emergency. He also transmitted a notice to Congress stating the emergency would continue beyond

the anniversary date. On Thursday, Feb. 9, ODH reported 8,833 new COVID-19 cases over the past seven days, slightly up from past totals of 8,260 on Feb. 2 and 8,155 on Jan. 26. There were also 402 hospitalizations, 23 ICU admissions and 71 deaths in the ODH data from Thursday. The number of cases in the past three weeks are around half of weekly totals in mid-December.

DISASTERS

Over the week, Gov. Mike DeWine, other state officials as well as federal officials continued monitoring and briefing the public on the aftermath of the train derailment in East Palestine, saying water and air monitoring so far is showing little long-term risk to residents, but urging those in the area with private wells to use bottled water and all residents to report any issues they experience. The Norfolk Southern train carrying several cars with hazardous chemicals, including vinyl chloride, derailed Friday, Feb. 3. Over the week, social media and local news reports have indicated residents have experienced headaches and other symptoms since the derailment, and some have reported dead animals. State officials also confirmed a plume from the controlled release is traveling down the Ohio River towards Huntington, WV, at a rate of one mile per hour, but said it has not appeared to have contaminated the water in any way that water treatment techniques couldn't filter out.

The Ohio EPA said Wednesday that it is confident the water in East Palestine's municipal water system is safe to drink after releasing the testing results of the system in the wake of a Norfolk Southern train derailment earlier this month. Ohio EPA said it did not detect any contaminants in raw waters it took from five wells that feed into the water system. It recommended that those who receive drinking water from private water wells schedule an appointment to have the wells tested by an independent consultant.

On Thursday, DeWine said that FEMA continues to tell him that Ohio is not eligible for assistance for East Palestine at this time. In an update, DeWine said he spoke with White House officials to address the need for federal help, and as a result of the conversation, he is asking for assistance from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health and Emergency Response Team, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to provide on-the ground assistance.

EDUCATION

Members of the State Board of Education (SBOE) Tuesday postponed a vote to award a contract to a search firm in the hunt for a permanent state superintendent, citing likely action by the General Assembly on a bill that would dramatically change the position. Ohio Department of Education (ODE) veteran Stephanie Siddens has been serving as interim state superintendent for over a year following the departures of Paolo DeMaria and Steve Dackin.

Senate Education Chair Andrew Brenner (R-Delaware) told his committee Tuesday to expect a handful of amendments at the next hearing on SB1 (Reineke), the priority measure from Senate Republicans to give the governor more direct control of education policy and administration. Brenner outlined three coming amendments meant to do the following:

- Establish specific qualifications as to the educational and managerial experience of the two deputy director positions for the proposed Department of Education and Workforce (DEW) established under the bill.
- Codify required stakeholder engagement as part of the DEW rulemaking process. Brenner said this would be similar to practices now in place at the Ohio EPA.

- Specify that DEW may not enforce policies or guidance unless they have gone through the full, formal rulemaking process.

The Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program of the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) is now accepting applications to develop and implement projects that enable and encourage children to safely walk or bike to school. The \$5 million program provides funding for infrastructure improvements such as pedestrian and bicycle crossing improvements, new or improved sidewalks and bike racks. It also helps fund non-infrastructure activities such as walk to school days, bike rodeos, public awareness campaigns and educational programs, the department explained. Eligible applicants include local governments, school districts, health districts, park districts or key nonprofit partners involved in advancing safe routes to school in communities. Infrastructure projects, however, can only be awarded to a city, village, county or township. ODOT will make awards on a competitive basis to projects that have been identified in a School Travel Plan, Active Transportation Plan, or similar plan approved by the department. The 2023 SRTS Application Guidance can be found online at <https://tinyurl.com/3sh6umht>. The application deadline is Friday, March 3, 2023.

A new budget structure will support existing shared services efforts of the Ohio School for the Deaf and Ohio State School for the Blind while maintaining them as separate entities, the shared superintendent for both schools told a House budget subcommittee Thursday. In testimony to the House Finance Primary and Secondary Education Subcommittee, Superintendent Lou Maynus said the schools already cooperate on afterschool programming, nursing, child nutrition, transportation and other administrative functions. The executive budget proposes \$33.35 million in FY24 and \$33.74 million in FY25, representing increases of 8.1 percent and 1.4 percent, respectively.

GENERAL ASSEMBLY

House Speaker Jason Stephens (R-Kitts Hill) Wednesday announced the process and deadline for candidates interested in filling the 90th Ohio House district seat. Former Rep. Brian Baldrige (R-Winchester) stepped down from the seat at the end of January to become director of the Department of Agriculture. Residents of the 90th District wishing to be considered for the appointment must submit a cover letter and resume to HD90Appointment@OhioHouse.gov by close of business on Tuesday, Feb. 21, 2023. Interviews will be held later in the week. The 90th district covers all of Adams and Scioto counties and a portion of Brown County. The appointment will be for the remainder of the current two-year term, which expires at the end of 2024.

Legislation reducing taxes, prohibiting transgender women/girls from playing women's/girls' sports, and providing universal private school vouchers are among House Republican priorities for the 135th General Assembly, Speaker Jason Stephens (R-Kitts Hill) announced Wednesday. Stephens said HB1 (Mathews) would "lower and flatten" taxes in the state. The "Save Women's Sports Act," HB6 (Powell), would prohibit transgender women and girls from participating in women's and girls' sports in K-12 schools, state institutions of higher education and private colleges. The "backpack bill," HB11 (McClain-John), would establish the "Backpack Scholarship Program" to begin operating in the 2023-2024 school year.

Other priority bills include the following:

- **HB2** (Cutrona-Upchurch), which declares it is the intent of the General Assembly to invest in projects across the state to foster economic growth and community development.

- **HB3** (Pavliga-McNally), which states the General Assembly's intent to create an affordable housing tax credit.
- **HB4** (Young-King), which declares the Legislature's intent to enact legislation regarding businesses that conduct economic boycotts or discriminate against certain companies or customers based on certain factors.
- **HB5** (Ray-Baker), which aims to modernize the adoption process.
- **HB7** (White-Humphrey), which aims to provide a "strong foundation" for mothers and babies in their first 1,000 days.
- **HB8** (Swearingen-Carruthers), which would enact the "Parents' Bill of Rights" and require schools to adopt a policy on parental notification on student health and instruction with "sexually-explicit" content.
- **HB9** (Manning-Lightbody), which would establish the "Grow Your Own Teacher Program," create a loan repayment program for eligible teachers and make other changes to teacher licensing.
- **HB10** (Callender-Sweeney), which would further commit to the "Fair School Funding Plan."
- **HB12** (Jones-Dobos), which would rename the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) as the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce and reform the functions of the State Board of Education.

The House also officially introduced the following budget bills:

- **HB23** (Edwards), the transportation budget.
- **HB31** (Edwards), the Ohio Bureau of Workers' Compensation budget.
- **HB32** (Edwards), the Ohio Industrial Commission budget.
- **HB33** (Edwards), the FY24-25 operating budget.

Speaker Jason Stephens (R-Kitts Hill) recently formally announced additions to the Majority Caucus Staff in a memo to House members and staff. They include Devin Babcock, policy director; Dan Baker, majority finance director; Heather Blessing, deputy chief legal counsel; Megan Fitzmartin, senior advisor to the speaker; Mike McGuire, senior deputy legal counsel; Pat Melton, director of strategic communications; and Kevin Stanek, chief legal counsel.

Legislation vetoed by Gov. Mike DeWine last month cleared committee Wednesday with amendments that establish funding for special counsel to the House, Senate and governor and that render precedents established by the Franklin County Common Pleas Court and 10th Appellate District before SB21's (McColley-Reynolds) effective date non-binding on common pleas and appeals courts in other counties. The Senate Judiciary Committee accepted a series of changes to SB21 before reporting it out on a party-line vote and rejected additional attempts by Democrats to amend the bill.

GREAT LAKES

U.S. Sen. J.D. Vance (R-OH) has been appointed co-chair of the U.S. Senate Great Lakes Task Force, Vance's office announced Tuesday. Former U.S. Sen. Rob Portman (R-OH) was the previous Republican co-chair of the task force. U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-MI) is the other co-chair, while U.S. Sens. Todd Young (R-IN) and Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) are vice chairs. The bipartisan panel aims to improve the economic and environmental health of the Great Lakes.

HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Reps. Ron Ferguson (R-Wintersville) and Tim Barhorst (R-Fort Loramie) announced legislation Tuesday to increase hospital price transparency and reduce health care costs in Ohio. They said most hospitals are not complying with federal transparency laws in place since the Obama administration, and that the bill would duplicate them in the Ohio Revised Code. The bill would also bar non-compliant hospitals from taking the following measures: referring, assigning or selling medical debt to debt collectors; seeking judgments on outstanding medical debt in state court; and filing negative credit reports against patients for outstanding bills.

Many Ohioans could lose ambulance services without a better reimbursement process for Medicaid patients, leaders of the Ohio EMS Chiefs Association (OEMSCA) said Thursday. Coshocton County EMS Chief Todd Shroyer and Delaware County EMS Assistant Chief Eric Burgess told the Joint Medicaid Oversight Committee (JMOC) that the state of Ohio could receive \$50 million to \$100 million from the federal government by participating in the Ambulance Supplemental Payment Program (ASPP). To receive the funding, the Ohio Department of Medicaid (ODM) would need to submit a state plan amendment to the U.S. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), they said. Shroyer said the current system for reimbursing public EMS providers is unsustainable.

MARIJUANA/HEMP

The Ohio Board of Pharmacy recently awarded two dispensary certificates of operation: one to Bear River Dispensary, located at 26 Moore St. in Delaware and the other to Ratio, located at 1145 W. High Ave. in New Philadelphia. There are now 66 dispensaries legally operating under the Ohio Medical Marijuana Control Program.

MEDICAID/MEDICAID REFORM

Senate Medicaid Committee members Tuesday asked Ohio Department of Medicaid (ODM) Director Maureen Corcoran about how the agency is implementing past budget mandates to prioritize disenrollment of beneficiaries who are most likely to no longer be eligible now that the pandemic emergency period is coming to a close. Sen. Steve Huffman (R-Tipp City) noted that ODM is projecting a drop of only about 220,000 out of the 800,000-person growth in caseload. "Where are these other 600,000 people coming from, and why are they going to stay on Medicaid?" he said. Corcoran cited multiple factors, including a drop in employer-sponsored insurance in Appalachia and a shift to high-deductible health plans that are making private coverage less obtainable. Huffman and Sen. Mark Romanchuk (R-Ontario) asked Corcoran about the 134-HB110 (Oelslager) provisions requiring ODM to work with a data analysis vendor to identify for priority review those who are mostly likely no longer eligible. "Why don't we put them in the front of the line in April and May?" Huffman asked. Corcoran said that will, in fact, happen, but prior analysis of

caseload demographics does not always reflect the current reality. Federal regulators require ODM to use recent information in making eligibility decisions.

PEOPLE

Cleveland-based Center for Community Solutions' (CCS) Executive Director John Corlett announced that he is retiring by year's end after 41 years in Ohio's nonprofit and government affairs arenas.

NFIB Ohio announced the re-election of officers to its Ohio Leadership Council, including Albert Macre of Albert F. Macre & Company (Steubenville) as chairman; Kelly Moore of GKM Auto Parts (Zanesville) as vice-chair; Clara Osterhage of RLO, Inc. (Dayton) as chair of the NFIB Ohio PAC, the organization's political action committee; and Chris Ellis of Helping Hands Healthcare, Inc. (Cincinnati) as the immediate past chair of the council.

James Kennedy has joined the County Commissioners Association of Ohio (CCAO) as a policy analyst, the organization announced Monday. Kennedy previously served as the legislative coordinator for the Martin County Board of County Commissioners in his hometown of Stuart, FL. Prior to that, he was a legislative aide in the House for Rep. Derek Merrin (R-Maumee) and a legislative assistant to the Tennessee Legislation Service in Nashville during the 2018 Tennessee General Assembly.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Over two-thirds of all law enforcement agencies in Ohio are now certified for policing standards administered by the Ohio Department of Public Safety (DPS), including most larger municipalities and all but 15 sheriffs' offices. The state recently eclipsed the 600 mark for certified departments out of nearly 900 law enforcement agencies statewide.

TECHNOLOGY/AEROSPACE

In the first meeting of the new House Aviation and Aerospace Committee Tuesday, Chair Adam Holmes (R-Nashport) said seven meetings with experts are already planned, though it will be some time before they consider legislation. Expected meeting topics include understanding existing state strategies with JobsOhio President and CIO J.P. Nauseef and Joe Zeis, advisor to Gov. Mike DeWine on aerospace and defense, on Tuesday, Feb. 28.

The InnovateOhio initiative recently released its 2022 annual report as a video, providing an overview of projects it supported during the year.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS/BROADBAND

BroadbandOhio announced it has selected nonprofit OCHIN to serve as statewide telehealth administrator, helping expand health care services for K-12 students in Ohio. This work will involve assisting BroadbandOhio with "planning and development of blueprints," which school leaders can use to connect students with health care providers and counselors over real-time videoconferencing. This partnership was made possible with funding in the current operating budget, and the initiative aims to help administrators in at least 10 districts successfully implement telehealth programs in their schools.

TOBACCO/SMOKING

Proceedings in the House Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services Thursday addressed twin concerns over a marked increase in recreational marijuana use and tobacco "vaping" in the state and nation. Republicans voiced opposition to both, especially among children. State Government Relations Director Dustin Holfinger of the American Heart Association (AHA) said while the organization doesn't have an official position on marijuana, AHA believes any form of smoking -- including pot -- is dangerous. Holfinger delivered proponent testimony on the executive budget, asking the Legislature to retain the governor's proposed increase in HB33 (Edwards) of \$20 million per year to the Tobacco Use Prevention Fund, which currently stands at only \$14.5 million annually. He noted Ohio's smoking rate is a third higher than the national average and trails only West Virginia, Kentucky and Louisiana.

TRANSPORTATION/INFRASTRUCTURE

The House Finance Transportation Subcommittee heard testimony on the transportation budget Tuesday from Ohio Public Works Commission (OPWC) Director Linda Bailiff and Ohio Department of Development (DOD) Director Lydia Mihalik. Bailiff said the proposed transportation budget has funding for the Local Transportation Improvement Program (LTIP), a competitive grant program the commission administers in conjunction with the State Capital Improvement Program. LTIP is for counties, municipalities and townships and provides funds for about 170 road and bridge projects each year. It is funded through one cent of the 28-cent motor vehicle fuel tax levy.

The House Finance Committee heard from one witness and received other written testimony Wednesday on the FY24-25 transportation budget, which has been officially introduced as HB23 (Edwards). Jason Warner of the Greater Ohio Policy Center, appearing as an interested party, advocated for public transportation investments. He noted that the General Assembly has invested a record \$141.5 million in public transportation agencies since FY20, and that the bill includes \$33 million in federal flex funding as well as \$37 million in General Revenue Funds (GRF) for public transit in this biennium.

The House Finance Transportation Subcommittee Wednesday heard from two agencies on the proposed FY24-25 transportation budget, HB23 (Edwards): Paul Muething, president of the Cincinnati Railway Board of Trustees; and Scott Corbitt, chair, and Matthew Dietrich, executive director, of the Ohio Rail Development Commission (ORDC). Muething explained that the Cincinnati Southern Railway (CSR) is the only municipally owned railway in the United States. It is a 337-mile stretch of track running from Cincinnati to Chattanooga. The Ohio Legislature approved the construction of the railroad in 1869 by passing the Ferguson Act, which is what Cincinnati is seeking to have amended in this budget. Norfolk Southern currently leases the line and is interested in purchasing the line from Cincinnati. That requires a change in state law. Specifically, the changes would not only permit the sale but would also restrict the use of the proceeds to the city's infrastructure.

Scott Corbitt, chair of the Ohio Rail Development Commission, and Matthew Dietrich, executive director, both testified on the commission's budget. Corbitt explained that all of the commission's work is "some form of public-private partnership" with Dietrich commenting that the commission is not a regulatory body. He had also explained to Rep. Monica Robb Blasdel (R-Columbiana) that ORDC does not work with mainline trains, but rather deals with short-line railroads. Corbitt noted that ORDC programs cross both the transportation and main operating budgets.

WORKERS' COMPENSATION

Lawmakers on the House Insurance Committee Wednesday questioned the need for the Ohio Bureau of Workers' Compensation (BWC) to change its name during the first hearings on the budgets for BWC and the Industrial Commission -- now in bill form as HB31 (Edwards) and HB32 (Edwards), respectively. BWC Administrator John Logue told the committee that HB31 gives BWC a 1.1 percent increase in its budget in FY24 and 1.8 percent increase in FY25 from current appropriation levels, which Logue attributed to "inflation, wage increases negotiated in our collective bargaining agreements, and the costs to invest in staff to reduce the cost of contracted personnel." He also outlined the biggest change of the bill, which would change the name of the BWC to the Ohio Department of Workforce Insurance and Safety, which he said better reflects the agency's work and aligns it with other state agencies.

Industrial Commission Chair Jim Hughes told the subcommittee that the commission is a "quasi-judicial" body that provides "a forum for fair and impartial resolutions of disputed workers' compensation claims, including but not limited to adjudicating claims involving an employer's violation of specific safety requirements, and determining eligibility for permanent total disability benefits." He said they have 12 offices in the state in addition to an Internet portal. He noted that the commission is not funded through the General Revenue Fund (GRF) but rather by an Administrative Cost Fund surcharge applied to the workers' compensation insurance base coverage rate. He said the proposed budget for FY24 is \$55.5 million, a 2.7 percent increase from FY23. The FY25 budget is up slightly at \$55.6 million.

WORKFORCE

Workforce and education priorities in the FY24-25 budget were the subject of significant discussion at the first Governor's Executive Workforce Board meeting of the year Monday, with Lt. Gov. Jon Husted, Ohio Department of Development (DOD) Director Lydia Mihalik, Ohio Department of Higher Education (ODHE) Chancellor Randy Gardner and interim Superintendent of Public Instruction Stephanie Siddens each giving presentations to the board. Several new board members were also announced, including Kevin Hoggatt from Intel, Meredith Reffey of Honda, Fairfield County Commissioner Dave Levacy and Brett Burgett of Kokosing. Husted said Ohio has a "robust job creation environment" that will continue to grow in the coming years due to major projects.

Gov. Mike DeWine and Lt. Gov. Jon Husted announced Monday the sixth annual In-Demand Jobs Week will be held from Monday, May 1 through Friday, May 6 with a focus on highlighting "top jobs that stem from career-focused education and the various paths available to Ohioans as they look for their next opportunity," according to the DeWine administration. Examples of those career pathways include career technical education that provides students of all ages with academic and technical skills and training needed to succeed; pre-apprenticeships that prepare for a formal registered apprenticeship upon graduation; College Credit Plus, which helps students earn college and high school credits simultaneously; and industry-recognized credentials, which demonstrate the skills and knowledge gained through hands-on learning in a specific job or industry. Information is available at <https://topjobs.ohio.gov/>.