

Testimony

**By Virgil Strickler, General Manager of the Ohio Expositions Commission
Before the House Committee on Agriculture and Conservation**

FY 2022-23 Budget Hearing

Good morning Chairman Koehler. My name is Virgil Strickler. I want to thank you for allowing me this opportunity to speak to you today and inform you of the impact of COVID-19 on the Ohio Expositions Commission.

The Commission operates the Ohio Expo Center, a year-round, multipurpose convention and meeting facility. In previous years, the Expo Center has been home to five of Columbus' top 10 conventions, and typically has more than 200 annual events in multiple onsite facilities. In the past, these events generate an estimated 3.2 million visitors each and every year. In a typical year, the Expo Center has created a substantial economic impact on the City of Columbus, Franklin County and the state of Ohio, typically around \$500 million. As you can imagine, though, the last year has been anything but typical.

The effects of COVID-19 have been devastating to the Ohio Expo Center. Revenues dropped from just over \$17 million in 2019 to just over \$3 million in 2020. The Ohio Expo Center has not hosted an event since March of 2020, beginning with the cancellation of the Arnold Sports Festival, which is held in part at the Expo Center, and of course, including the cancellation of the 167th Ohio State Fair last summer. Fortunately, the agency had been able to put \$1 million into the State Fair Reserve account over the course of several years, but in 2020, this fund was depleted to keep the agency operating at minimal levels. The Ohio Expo Center is currently operating with a staff that has been reduced to just 7 employees to maintain the 360-acre facility during the pandemic crisis – about 10% of the employees it had last March.

During 2020, the facility quickly pivoted from renting its facility for trade shows and events, to COVID-19 response, testing, and personal protective equipment storage. With hundreds of thousands of square feet available, the Ohio Expo Center was able to fill the need for those needing expansive spaces to properly socially-distance while storing equipment, or for the public to drive through for a COVID-19 test, flu shot, and now, COVID-19 vaccines

While the events in a given year at the Ohio Expo Center would typically make up for roughly half of our revenue, we wouldn't be who we are without our premier event – the Ohio State Fair. The Ohio State Fair notably boasts exhibitors from each of Ohio's 88 counties. Whether they are young people exhibiting a 4-H public speaking project, showcasing their junior FFA livestock exhibits, or participating in the many open arts, cooking or horticultural competitions, they are able to showcase their work in the state's largest spotlight. These outstanding Ohioans annual exhibit approximately 12,000 junior livestock entries, 12,500 open livestock projects and 14,000 entries in our numerous other competitions.

The Ohio State Fair was scheduled to begin on July 28th of this summer. The continued shadow of COVID-19 has loomed large over the 2021 fair. The current environment put the 2021 fair in an incredibly difficult place. The agency's current staffing level made planning for the fair challenging at best, and the possibility of putting on a full fair and having a visitor turnout of less than 75-80% of typical attendance and current orders to limit indoor venues to 25% capacity could have resulted in a significant financial loss. The Commission made the decision on April 8th to limit this year's fair to livestock and education competitions. This decision was based on medical opinions of what is in the best interest of the safety of all Ohioans.

Our agency is incredibly fortunate to have strong partnerships with many state agencies and community groups. We are thankful to work closely with the Ohio Department of Agriculture, the Ohio Development Services Agency, the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, the Ohio Department of Public Safety, the Ohio Department of Transportation, the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, The Ohio State University, the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation and Ohio's diverse agricultural commodity groups. These relationships have helped the Ohio State Fair continue to serve as a premier showcase at which Ohio's businesses and industries can highlight products including agriculture and green initiatives to help foster growth within the state.

The Ohio Expositions Commission looks forward to the challenge of rebuilding the agency post-pandemic. The support that we receive from Governor DeWine and the Ohio Legislature will help to ensure that the Ohio State Fair will once again be one of the country's greatest expositions. We are very proud of our accomplishments of producing a great State Fair and celebrating everything our great state has to offer.

Representatives, thank you for the opportunity to share this information with you today. I am available for your questions.