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House Bill 283
House Criminal Justice Committee
June 10, 2021
William Murdock, MORPC Executive Director
Written Proponent Testimony

Chair LaRe, Vice-Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Leland, and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this written proponent testimony on House Bill 283 (HB 283), which provides necessary measures to curb distracted driving and save lives.

My name is William Murdock and I am the Executive Director of the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC). MORPC is a voluntary association of 75 local governments across Central Ohio's rural, suburban, and urban areas. We provide programs, services, and funding related to transportation, land use, data, sustainability, and economic prosperity.

One of MORPC's chief public policy goals is to achieve an advanced, inclusive, safe, and exceptional transportation system that connects Central Ohio's people and products to the world. MORPC serves as the federally designated metropolitan planning organization, or MPO, for transportation planning in the Columbus urbanized area. This means MORPC has transportation responsibilities and funding per federal law. We also work on transportation planning for rural areas throughout Central Ohio. Seven counties in our region, surrounding the MPO, recently formed the Central Ohio Rural Planning Organization (CORPO). We provide the staff and technical assistance which is value-added transportation planning capacity for our rural and growing areas. It's also part of the rural transportation organization program with the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT).

Transportation technology is evolving quickly, and we consider ourselves lucky to be working on transformative transportation policy during this period of innovation. Advances in technology can increase efficiency, heighten safety, and provide better services. Yet, technology can be a double-edged sword, and distracted driving is an unintended consequence of such advancement. Distracted driving is a growing trend that has caused an increase in deaths and injuries on our roads. Driving was markedly down in 2020 due to the pandemic, yet a recent report found a surprising and alarming statistic: Traffic deaths rose last year. The National Safety Council (NSC) says deaths from motor vehicles rose 8% last year, with as many as 42,060 people dying in vehicle crashes. When comparing traffic deaths to the number of miles driven, the rate of fatalities rose 24% — the highest spike in nearly a century. Here in Central Ohio, in 2019 there were 222 fatalities and 1275 serious injuries from crashes. This is devastating for too many families here and across Ohio. There's also an economic cost: MORPC estimates the societal cost of these serious crashes is \$3.94 billion.

MORPC has a long history of working closely with local communities to ensure residents are safe while traveling. Our safety program staff actively analyzes crash data, so we can better understand why crashes

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occur and how certain populations, behaviors, and locations are more susceptible to a deadly traffic crash. Like many employers, MORPC has an internal policy that bans staff from distracted driving. It is for these reasons and more that we strongly support broadening the existing texting-while-driving prohibition in the Ohio Revised Code (ORC) to prohibit using an electronic wireless communications device (EWCD) while driving and make the use of an EWCD while driving a primary offense, rather than a secondary offense.

Another central public policy goal for MORPC and its local governments is to raise awareness of racial and social justice issues and work to continually improve communities within our growing region. Although it is urgent for us to pass this bill, we must also be mindful of potential unintended consequences. In the book *Suspect Citizens: What 20 Million Traffic Stops Tell Us About Policing and Race*, Frank R. Baumgartner, Derek A. Epp, and Kelsey Shoub found that compared to their share in the population, Black drivers are almost twice as likely to be pulled over as white drivers, even though white people drive more on average. They also discovered that Black drivers are more likely to be searched following a stop. Just by getting in a car, a Black driver has about twice the odds of being pulled over and about four times the odds of being searched. This is tragic and unacceptable.

Every proposal on safety should consider how to improve this situation. Therefore, we appreciate the language in the bill that would require a law enforcement officer who issues a ticket for distracted driving, to report the issuance of the ticket, citation and ensure that the report indicates the offender's race. Every other month, the agency must collect all of the reports from its officers and submit a compiled report to the Attorney General. The compiled report must include the number and race of the offenders who received a ticket, citation, or summons for violations of the two laws during the prior two months. Using the submitted information, the Attorney General must complete an annual report describing the total number of offenders by race who received a ticket, citation, or summons for violations of the EWCD-while-driving prohibition or the distracted driving law. We respectfully request the language be amended to state that the law enforcement officer collects data on the race of any individual they pull over regardless of if they received a ticket, citation, summons, or warning for distracted driving. This will provide more clarity of who is getting pulled over for distracted driving rather than who is receiving a ticket.

We commend Governor DeWine, Representative Abrams, and Representative Lampton for their leadership on this critical issue. MORPC strongly advocates for the passage of HB 283 to help protect all Ohioans. We believe it is critical to provide law enforcement the necessary tools to deter distracted driving. Doing such will save lives and make our roads safer for everyone. We must make the use of wireless devices behind the wheel as unacceptable as drinking and driving is today, and we believe that tougher consequences will be a strong deterrent.

Thank you again for the opportunity to express MORPC's support of this important bill. Please do not hesitate to contact me, at 614-233- 4101 or wmurdock@morpc.org , with any questions or whenever MORPC can be of service.

Kind Regards,



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