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March 2, 2026

Commissioners met with Ohio Congress members recently in Washington, D.C. Thank you to Senators Jon Husted and Bernie Moreno and Representatives Warren Davidson, Jim Jordan and Greg Landsman for their time to discuss federal issues and their impact on counties.

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ASSOCIATION AND MEMBER NEWS

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Counties Current is moving!

Beginning next week, *Counties Current* will no longer be sent from MailChimp. Instead, it will be sent using CCAO's e-bulletin system. The newsletter will have a different look but the content will not change, and the ability to view the email in a web browser will be retained.

Changing to our e-bulletin system will allow us to keep our audience list more up to date and ensure that we can continue to provide important county, state, and federal news, as well as educational opportunities, to the full CCAO membership.

The current mailing list has been transferred so there is no action required of you. Those who currently receive *Counties Current* should not see an interruption.

However, it is possible that some members of the mailing list where missed in the transfer. If you do not receive the March 9 issue of Counties Current by 10:00 a.m. that morning, please contact Research Analyst Nick Ciolli. He will make sure you are on the new mailing list.

Thank you for reading!

Ohio Counties Scholarship accepting applications

The 2026 Ohio Counties Scholarship application is available through the CCAO Research and Educational Foundation!

This scholarship supports the next generation of public servants. Since 2023, the Foundation has awarded $30,000 in scholarships to 15 young leaders from 14 Ohio counties. This year, five scholarships will be awarded, with an application deadline of **May 1**.

Applicants should plan on a career in public service in Ohio.

This includes, but not limited to: elected official, public administrators, civil servants/government employee, social workers, military, education, healthcare, law enforcement and justice, emergency services, non-profit and community service, conservation/wildlife, city/state planners, public works employees, and workforce development.

We would greatly appreciate any help you can provide in sharing this opportunity within your county, including:

- Posting on social media
- Sharing through press releases or newsletters
- Distributing to local schools, guidance counselors, or local partners

Thank you for helping us spread the word and reach Ohio's future leaders! Please reach out to Managing Director of Enterprise and Retirement Services Steve Caraway at scaraway@ccao.org if you have any questions.

CEBCO Managing Director position open and accepting applicants

The County Employee Benefits Consortium of Ohio (CEBCO) is soliciting applications for the Managing Director, Health and Wellness position.

The Managing Director will lead and manage CEBCO in delivering health care, wellness, and employee benefits to CEBCO's member counties. The position is also a part of the CCAO Management Team.

The ideal candidate will have industry knowledge of the health insurance industry, knowledge of ACA, HIPPA, ERISA, and other health-related regulatory compliance reporting, and have more than five years experience in the health insurance industry.

More information about the position can be found here.

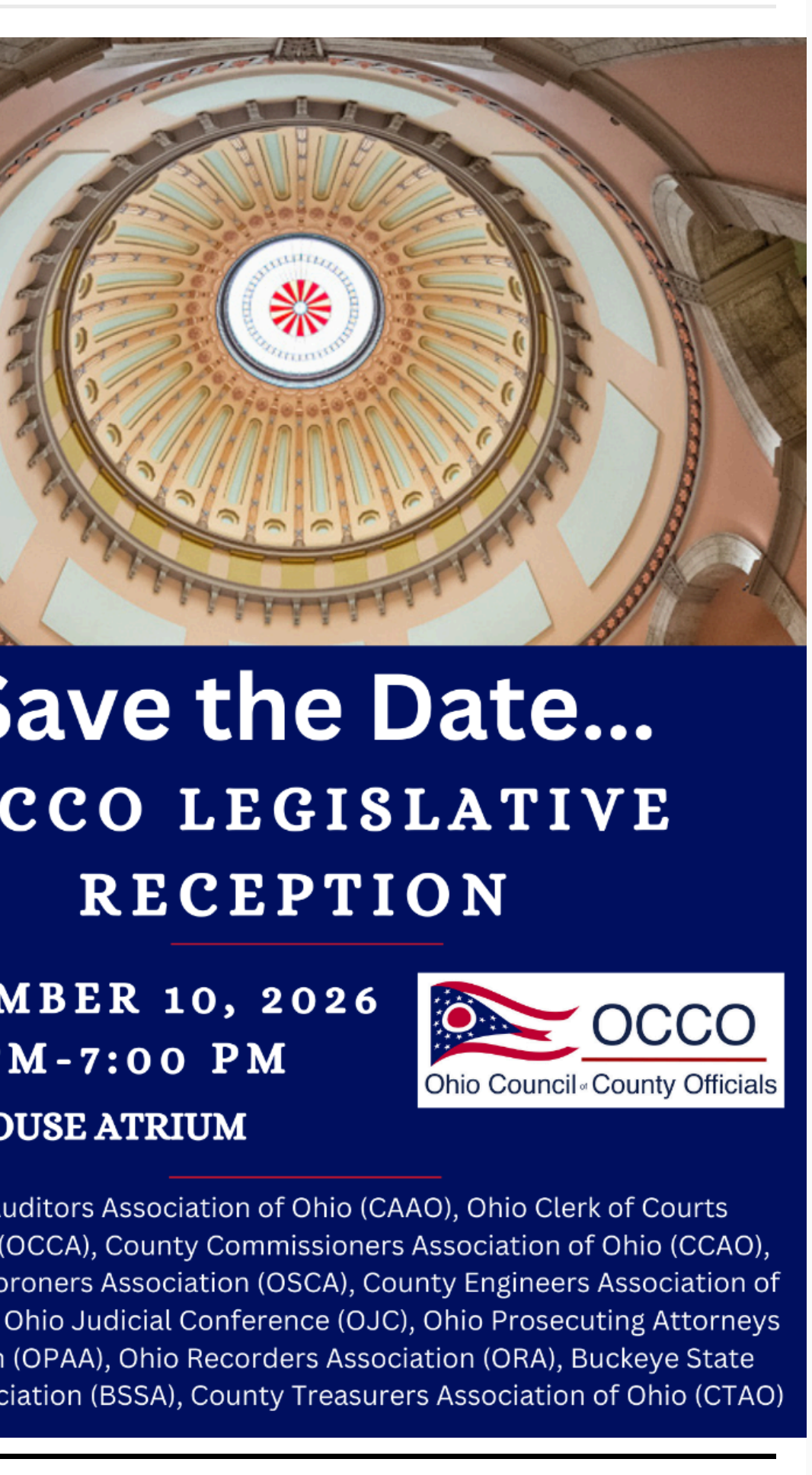
CCAO accepting applications for Accounting Manager position

CCAO is hiring an Accounting Manager to lead day-to-day accounting operations for CCAO, CEBCO, CORSA, the CCAO Service Corporation, and the CCAO Research and Education Foundation.

The manager will be tasked with supervising accounting staff, developing internal controls, and assisting with financial reporting, analysis, and audit preparation.

Applicants for the position must be Certified Public Accountants and have at least five years experience in progressive accounting, including three years of supervising staff. Knowledge of health and property/casualty insurance accounting is also ideal, as is experience with government accounting.

If you are interested in this position, please submit a resume and a letter of interest to CCAO Finance & Benefits Manager Thisbe Butcher at tbutcher@ccao.org.



Save the Date...

OCCO LEGISLATIVE RECEPTION

NOVEMBER 10, 2026
5:00 PM-7:00 PM
STATEHOUSE ATRIUM

OCCO
Ohio Council of County Officials

County Auditors Association of Ohio (CAAO), Ohio Clerk of Courts Association (OCCA), County Commissioners Association of Ohio (CCAO), Ohio State Coroners Association (OSCA), County Engineers Association of Ohio (CEAO), Ohio Judicial Conference (OJC), Ohio Prosecuting Attorneys Association (OPAA), Ohio Recorders Association (ORA), Buckeye State Sheriffs Association (BSSA), County Treasurers Association of Ohio (CTAO)

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STATE AND FEDERAL

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OPERS funded level changes slightly with positive investment returns

The following is an excerpt from OPERS' monthly newsletter

OPERS' funded level at the end of 2025 is expected to decline about one percentage point from the previous year, according to preliminary investment returns from last year.

Preliminary investment return results as of Dec. 31, 2025, show that the OPERS Defined Benefit Fund earned a 14.4% return in 2025. Despite the favorable investment performance, the system's estimated funded ratio is expected to decline to 82% from 83%. That means OPERS has 82 cents for every dollar it owes in future liabilities.

The forecasted time expected to pay off the system's unfunded actuarial accrued liabilities, defined as the amortization period, is estimated to increase from 15 years to 17 years.

OPERS smooths its pension investment returns over a four-year period for funding purposes, which explains why the funded level is down slightly after a year in which we outgained our assumed investment rate of return of 6.9%.

OPERS expects an investment gain of about $7.3 billion last year. Because of our four-year smoothing structure, we would recognize about $1.8 billion of that gain in 2025. However, heading into last year, OPERS had an unrecognized net loss carryforward of $2.4 billion that gets fully recognized this year, and thus the funded level is expected to decline by 1%.

Going forward, OPERS should have a net unrecognized asset gain carryforward of about $7 billion, to be recognized over the next three years.

For the OPERS Health Care Plan, the primary funding metric is the estimated remaining years of solvency. With a preliminary 12-month investment return of 16.4% as of Dec. 31, 2025, the plan's solvency period is expected to improve to 32 years, from 27 at the end of 2024.

This forecast is based on consideration of just one factor in the final actuarial analysis. While investment returns make up a key component of the final analysis, there will be other factors that are part of the final actuarial valuation. OPERS' external actuary will present the final asset and liability results to the Board in May for the pension plan and in September for the health care plan.

REMINDER: Community project application deadline is in 10 days

The deadline to submit applications for community projects from the state's upcoming capital budget is ***March 12***.

The community project portion of the capital bill provides an opportunity for local governments, nonprofits, and other community organizations to receive state infrastructure funding. Some of the community projects the Constitution allows funding for are parks, trails, theaters, jails, museums, and sports facilities.

The Office of Budget and Management has a list of project types that either cannot be funded through community project funds, are funded through other sources, or have traditionally been deemed unfundable. If you submit a project that falls into one of these categories, it will likely be denied.

Given limited funds and a highly competitive process, you should verify that any projects you submit are eligible for bonding. If a project is not bondable, it cannot be funded through the capital budget. Additionally, while you can submit multiple requests, it is recommended that applicants focus on a single strong project and provide all requested information by the required deadline.

Projects that are higher on a legislator's list are more likely to get funded than projects lower on the list. Some members may add every proposed project in their district to their list, so it is important to work with your members to ensure the project ranks higher than others.

EDUCATION AND GRANTS

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Auditor of State Local Government Conference to be held later this month

The Auditor of State will be hosting the 2026 iteration of the Local Government Officials Conference on March 19 and 20 in Columbus at the Hyatt Regency Hotel.

The event will cover a variety of topics of import to local government officials including, but not limited to, the following:

- Ethics
- Cybersecurity
- Firefighter Fair Labor Standards Act provisions
- Macroeconomic Impacts on Local Governments
- Spear Phishing

Registration for the event closes next Monday, March 9, and is $300. Payment must be made with a credit or debt card. Registration for single day attendance is not available.

More information about the event, including a full agenda and the registration link, is available here.

SAVE THE DATE: Cyber incident training

The Ohio Cyber Reserve has shared a save the date with CCAO for a cyber incident response training session that will be held on Monday, July 13, in Cincinnati.

The training will be open to CCAO members.

More information, including a registration link, will be available in April. For the time being, if you are interested in this training please put the Save the Date on your calendars.

COUNTY NEWS

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Each week Counties Current highlights the happenings in our counties in the words of their local media. One story from each of the CCAO's five districts is highlighted, and on occasion other stories may be highlighted as well.

Northwest District

Commissioners discuss uncertainties about First Quality infrastructure

Crescent-News, February 23, 2026

Defiance County commissioners discussed during their Monday meeting additional options for developing wastewater infrastructure for the new First Quality plant being built west of Defiance.

Defiance County Engineer Warren Schlatter presented additional options for wastewater collection system improvements for First Quality — building a new packaged treatment plant owned by the county and discharging into the Maumee River. This might cost roughly $5.2 million.

A second option involving the county would be extending lines to an existing county-owned lagoon that serves Defiance and Paulding counties on Ohio 111 — just north of the Defiance-Paulding County line. The estimated cost is $6.2 million to extend piping approximately 2 1/2 miles.

Project planning initially proceeded with an assumption that the City of Defiance would treat wastewater from First Quality through a collection system extending outside the municipal corporation limits. This option would cost an estimated $3.9 million.

Schlatter told commissioners that First Quality's actual daily discharge from two plants — the company plans to manufacture paper products such as tissues and paper towels — would only be about 10,000 gallons per day. That would be well below the 200,000 gallons per day that was mentioned when the project was first discussed.

The company may eventually build four plants, according to local officials, so wastewater discharge flow might reach only 20,000 gallons per day. But a lot of uncertainties remain, depending upon such things as First Quality's possible expansion in the future, further economic development along the corridor and whether existing businesses might be added to any new system.

Northeast District

Trumbull County Commissioners meeting in Howland, Ohio, focuses on tax relief for property owners

WKBN, February 25, 2026

A large crowd gathered Wednesday night in Howland to learn how property taxes can be reduced and where the Trumbull County Commissioners stand on the idea.

Some attendees were trustees from the various townships who don't want their property tax money cut. Others were residents who say they're paying way too much. In the middle, the commissioners must find a compromise.

Howland's Len Gantler said he has no issue with funding the township, but he explained to the 75 people in the room what he pays in property tax.

"My taxes on a 2,800-square-foot ranch are almost $10,000. Over $800 a month," Gantler said. "You can't go on like this."

The bulk of the special meeting, however, was to discuss the two options of tax relief facing the commissioners — the owner-occupancy and homestead programs.

The owner-occupancy program would be a tax break for homeowners who live in their homes. The homestead program would provide tax breaks for senior citizens and the disabled.

If approved by commissioners, owner occupancy would eliminate $408,000 in property taxes, and the homestead program would eliminate $1.3 million. If both were approved, the impact would be $1.7 million.

All three commissioners had something to say.

"I don't think, as one commissioner, that we should rush into doing anything, because if we pass the tax, it doesn't take effect until 2027," said Commissioner Tony Bernard.

"The state has to pony up. They have to be more forgiving to the county, to the townships, and they need to come up with some money. They do have $4 billion in a rainy day fund," said Commissioner Rick Hernandez.

Commissioner Denny Malloy knows the dilemma facing property owners. He's heard the stories.

Central District

Funding cuts, lack of corporate support jeopardize Knox County Transit's Night Bus

Knox Pages, February 28, 2026

More than half of Knox County Transit riders use public transit for employment, but that service is in jeopardy due to funding cuts and a lack of corporate support.

In January 2025, employment accounted for 32% of ridership. That has shifted significantly.

"We actually are up to 52% employment, so over half of our rides are getting people to or from work," Transit Director Bethany Celmar told the commissioners on Tuesday.

The remaining rides were 20% medical, 13% personal, 8% education, and 7% shopping.

"So we really are hitting some really big needs and some big niches in the community where we want to be with workforce and access to healthcare," Celmar said. "Those are kind of the two priorities."

However, Celmar said employers are not supporting the transit agency.

"I'm certainly going to be bumping that up to the higher priority and pushing a little bit harder, because any time we're getting squeezed, it's going to be employment, it's going to be jobs," she said.

Walmart is KCT's biggest user for employment riders. Wendy's, McDonald's, and Tim Horton's are others. Celmar said it is difficult to elicit support from chains.

The lack of corporate support jeopardizes the Night Bus, which runs from 7 p.m. to 1 a.m.

Celmar said previous conversations have been "this is the Night Bus, would you like to sponsor it?"

Now, she said, the conversation is "this is the end date."

Southwest District

Clinton County approves study to locate historic 'Obscure Lot' Cemetery

Wilmington News Journal, February 26, 2026

Clinton County commissioners have approved a $15,000 contract with Gray & Pape Heritage Management to conduct archival research and mapping aimed at identifying the location and boundaries of the historic Clinton County Infirmary Cemetery, also known as the "Obscure Lot," according to county records.

The action was taken Wednesday, Feb. 25, following a recommendation from County Engineer Jeff Linkous and Deputy Engineer Adam Fricke, who advised hiring the firm to complete the initial work needed to determine which areas of the property are most likely to have been used as a cemetery and which areas can be confidently excluded.

County officials said Gray & Pape has provided an estimated timeline of about 30 days to complete its initial phase of work.

Gray & Pape's proposal outlines a historical desktop review and site visit that will include analyzing archival documents, including maps compiled by county agencies, reviewing research from local residents and the Clinton County Historical Society, examining records from the Tax Map Office, GIS Office and Recorder's Office, and reviewing LiDAR imagery of the area. The firm will also conduct a site visit of areas with the greatest potential for surface examination and photographs.

Based on that research, the firm will prepare a written memorandum summarizing the historical context of the property, identifying areas most likely to have been used as a cemetery, and outlining a process, timeline and budget for future ground-truthing work to define the extent of the cemetery boundaries. The proposal specifies that the work is focused on defining the boundaries of the cemetery and will not involve identifying individual burials.

The proposal also notes that, aside from a single site visit, no archaeological or architectural fieldwork is included at this stage and that the historical review will be limited in scope to support identifying potential cemetery locations.

In a letter sent to Rusty Groves, who has been involved in efforts to document the site, the Clinton County Board of Commissioners said a purchase order for the work has been requested and should be opened this week. The board also requested a timeline for the work and said a copy of the final report will be provided once the study is completed.

Southeast District

Belmont County Courthouse plaza soon to be ADA compliant

Times Leader, February 25, 2026

The Belmont County Courthouse plaza will soon be getting a facelift.

What will soon be named the "Belmont County Veterans Plaza" will receive critical ADA accessibility updates.

Commissioner J.P. Dutton said that the board of commissioners thought the name would be fitting because of the veterans community, not just in Belmont County specifically, but the veterans community the entire Ohio Valley.

"There's been such a high percentage of residents in Belmont County that have served this nation. And we want to recognize that," Dutton said. "It'll be named the Belmont County Veterans Plaza in recognition of the efforts of so many that have sacrificed for all of our freedom."

He added that the beginnings of this project goes back several years with the beginning stages being in 2017.

"We did really substantial work restoring the exterior of the courthouse during then – there was some damage done to the courthouse plaza just because of some of the crane work that was needed for that project. And at that time, the board really started looking at wanting to address a little bit of this damage, but also just made them reexamine the front of the courthouse," Dutton said. "We were made aware of a funding opportunity through the Ohio Department of Transportation to do a project like that. And we started pursuing this grant opportunity.

"We were unsuccessful for the first time, so we went back to the drawing board, and some of the guidance we were given is that we needed to broaden the scope of the project and look at some areas that we hadn't looked at before. So we did that and after resubmitting, reapplying and trying, we did end up being successful, receiving funding for the project."

DATES TO REMEMBER

Please view the CCAO Calendar for a comprehensive list of events to note.

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MARCH 13
CORSA Board of Directors' Meeting

MARCH 20
CCAO Board of Directors' Meeting

MARCH 27
CEBCO Board of Directors' Meeting

APRIL 10
CEBCO Annual Meeting

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