

# **GOP opposition threatens Ohio's enhanced driver's licenses**

By **Jeremy Pelzer**  
**Cleveland.com**

COLUMBUS, Ohio—Less than two years after state lawmakers [made Ohio the sixth state to authorize “enhanced” driver's licenses and ID cards](#), legislators are now trying to make a U-turn.

Enhanced licenses and IDs – not to be confused with “Real ID” cards that will soon be required to board airplanes – are designed to allow residents to cross the border into Canada, Mexico and Caribbean nations without needing a passport.

Each enhanced license contains a radio chip that broadcasts the holder's personal information to border guards as a way to more quickly pass through security -- a perk similar to the U.S. government's PreCheck program at Transportation Security Administration checkpoints in airports.

Ohio's 2023 state transportation budget ordered state officials to negotiate an agreement with the U.S. government to start issuing enhanced licenses and IDs.

But nearly two years later, Ohio hasn't yet issued any enhanced licenses or IDs, as the state Department of Public Safety is still waiting to get approval from the feds, according to Lindsey Bohrer, a spokeswoman for the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles.

Now, some state lawmakers are seeking to repeal the initiative before it starts. The latest version of the state transportation budget bill, unveiled Tuesday by the Ohio House Finance Committee, would erase the 2023 transportation budget language authorizing enhanced licenses and IDs.

It wasn't immediately clear Wednesday which lawmaker sought the repeal, which was one of nearly 40 changes that the committee made to the 318-page transportation budget bill.

It also remains to be seen whether the repeal will end up in the final version of the transportation budget, which won't be sent to Gov. Mike DeWine until after several more weeks of legislative hearings, negotiations, votes, and revisions.

House Finance Committee Chair Brian Stewart, a Pickaway County Republican, said a majority of his GOP colleagues opposed adding the enhanced licenses measure to the transportation budget two years ago because of concerns over issuing a digital license of that type.

However, Stewart continued, the enhanced licenses measure was added to the transportation budget anyway by House leadership, which was headed at the time by then-House Speaker Jason Stephens, a Lawrence County Republican who was elected speaker with crucial support from House Democrats.

Former state Rep. Brett Hillyer, a Tuscarawas County Republican who was among the legislative supporters two years ago of creating enhanced licenses and IDs, said in an interview Wednesday that the idea was to help Ohioans who frequently have to cross international borders for work, especially as many of them have to provide the same information to get a Real ID.

“The additional cost of the passport, in some cases, is cost-prohibitive. What if I can save you the need of going out and buying a full-on passport?” Hillyer said. “That just makes sense to me.”

But the timing of the move by Ohio to offer enhanced licenses was somewhat curious, as the five other states that already offer such licenses authorized them more than 15 years ago.

Those states -- Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Vermont, and Washington, all of which are along the Canadian border – created enhanced licenses in response to the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative, an agreement under which the U.S. and its neighbors began requiring travelers to show proof of citizenship, instead of just a driver’s license.

Officials in those states [have said](#) the licenses are popular and have generally worked well. However, four Canadian provinces that began offering enhanced licenses in the late 2000s have stopped issuing them, citing low demand and more convenient alternatives.

State Rep. Bride Rose Sweeney of Westlake, the top Democrat on the House Finance Committee, said Wednesday that she hasn’t heard a lot from her fellow Democratic lawmakers about what they think about ending enhanced licenses in Ohio.

“We’re still kind of realizing the impact (of them),” she said.