



Ohio Turnpike Commission – A Legacy of Diversity and Inclusion

By Ferzan M. Ahmed, P.E.
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Around the same time that Ohio’s leaders envisioned a nonstop superhighway across the northern corridor of the state, the civil rights movement in the country was underway and gaining momentum.

In the 1950s, as Black Americans fought for equality and social justice, the Ohio Turnpike Commission championed non-discriminatory hiring and employment practices many years ahead of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

In a letter to the Columbus, Ohio chapter of the NAACP in 1952, James W. Shocknessy – who served as commission chairman from its inception in 1949 until his death in 1976 – wrote, “It would be quite unthinkable that the commission would choose personnel or conduct any of its affairs on any basis other than pure merit, regardless of race, religious belief, or other unfair, improper or discriminatory standard.”

The commission also required all hotels and motels listed in its publication, *Shelter for the Night Along the Ohio Turnpike*, to agree as a condition of the listing that there would be no discrimination against any person because of race or religion.

This action by the commission preceded the enactment of both state and federal legislation that prohibited discrimination in public accommodations, such as motels, hotels, and restaurants.

By 1964, numerous Black Americans were employed by the Ohio Turnpike Commission as toll collectors, maintenance workers and in various administrative roles.

After his death in 1976, the Ohio Turnpike was named in honor of its first chairman, James W. Shocknessy.

In the same year as his passing, Gerald Ford was the first U.S. president to officially recognize Black History Month in 1976.

As we celebrate Black History Month, we honor the commission's legacy of diversity and inclusion by recognizing prominent past commission leaders, like Clarence D. Rogers, Jr., the first Black member and commission chairman from 1976-1991; and Daisy G. Collins, who served as assistant general counsel for the commission from 1973-1974; as well as acknowledge the contributions that all employees have made on behalf of the Ohio Turnpike and Infrastructure Commission.

There are many ways for us to celebrate Black History Month. And one way for us to do that is to honor the memory and legacy of leaders, like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks and do something for others.

And I will leave you with a quote from one of my heroes, Muhammad Ali: "Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on Earth."

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