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IN SUPPORT of HB 530
House State and Local Government Committee
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Chairwoman Anielski, Vice Chairman Hambley, Ranking Member Holmes and members of the House State and Local Government Committee, thank you for this opportunity to share a case history that is the foundation of my firm support of House Bill 530.

I am the President of Lake Erie Shores & Islands, a destination marketing organization formed in 2007 as a partnership between the Ottawa County and Erie County Visitors Bureaus. We are responsible for promoting a region that draws 10 million visitors a year who generate nearly \$2 billion in tourism related spending and over \$236 million in tax dollars. I started my position in 2005 as the Executive Director of the Ottawa County Visitors Bureau when it was still operating independently with the majority of funding derived through a county lodging tax governed by the commissioners.

At the time we had a 21-person board of trustees made up of business leaders from throughout the county; no county commissioner was on the board at that time. The commissioners received periodic activity reports and financial information from the bureau, however beyond that there was little interaction with them. This was no fault of any commissioner or board member, it was simply the relationship that existed at the time.

I had moved from a position at the Licking County Visitors Bureau and was accustomed to frequent communication with the commissioners in that county, in fact one of the commissioners had a standing seat on the bureau board. That procedure remains in effect today and I'm told by the current director this continues to be very positive and productive.

Shortly after starting my position in Ottawa County I became concerned about the bureau's finances; especially some outstanding debt. Anyone looking at the bureau's financial statements would not readily identify any problems. The CPA firm was keeping accurate records and annual audits were showing no issues. But a deep look into the details of the organization's cash-flow showed a mounting debt that was jeopardizing our ability to fulfill our mission to promote the region's tourism offerings.

After consulting with the board officers, we felt it best to approach the county commissioners to explain the situation and request the county's help. We needed to both clear the debt and develop a long-term solution to ongoing cash-flow challenges. One of the commissioners at that time was Steve Arndt, now of course a member of the Ohio Legislature and this committee.

A meeting in early 2006 with officers of the visitors bureau, the county commissioners, and the county administrator resulted in the bureau receiving a county loan that enabled us to satisfy the required debts and provided sufficient operating revenue to allow the time necessary to work on a long-term solution. I remember thinking at the time that had a county commissioner been on the board when this problem first began to surface, things likely would not have progressed to the point where the loan was required.

The commissioners it seemed were thinking the same as they granted the loan contingent on the bureau adhering to a number of stipulations including a new structure for the board of trustees that guaranteed a seat for one of the county commissioners. Other stipulations ensured a diverse board composition with staggered term limits so that fresh perspectives would always be at the table. There were also new procedures put into place for reporting bureau activities back to the commissioners and the bureau was required to develop the aforementioned long-range plan.

In January 2007 Representative Steve Arndt, then Commissioner Arndt, was appointed to the Ottawa County Visitors Bureau Board and began attending all meetings as a voting member. He remained on the board through 2010, and as such was part of that board team working on the long-range plan for the bureau's finances. Elements of the plan required input from the bureau board of trustees; the county commissioners; and the county auditor, and it was much more efficient and effective to have a commissioner at the board table as the solutions were being developed. Commissioner Arndt by helping create it, was able to fully understand and embrace the plan and in turn bring it to his fellow commissioners for discussion.

I am happy to say that our plan was successful; we were able to pay back the county loan ahead of schedule and with new policies, procedures and partnerships in place have been in excellent financial shape ever since. This has enabled our organization to significantly increase our effectiveness in drawing visitors and associated tax dollars to the county. Having a commissioner on the visitors bureau board therefore not only benefitted the bureau, but the county and all its residents.

The Ottawa County Visitors Bureau has had a commissioner as a voting board member each year since 2007 and it has always been extremely positive. Our commissioner board members are part of the team working toward our shared common goal of driving economic impact for the county through increased visitor spending. I have had the pleasure of reporting to four commissioners as board members during my time at the bureau and each has contributed to our success in unique ways and provided that direct link back to the other commissioners and county officials.

There have been only a few times over the years when a particular topic required a commissioner to abstain from a vote. Having that ability, combined with the fact that the commissioner's vote would be only one of (in our case) 15 votes is in my opinion adequate safeguard against any potential conflict of interest. Furthermore, annual financial reviews by an independent firm and biennial audits conducted by the auditor of state with all documents including board minutes being examined provide an additional layer of oversight.

I know many of my county visitors bureau counterparts could easily be before you today with their own testimonials on the benefits of having a county commissioner serving on their board of trustees. There are others who do not have this structure in place who could relate how this has resulted in a negative situation for their organization or at least created a disconnect in what should be a mutually beneficial relationship.

House Bill 530 as submitted provides a means for those who have benefitted from commissioner involvement on their boards to continue doing so and opens the door for other counties to follow suit. And it provides for counties that choose not to entertain this option to enact a more restrictive policy. For these reasons and all others I've mentioned, I wholeheartedly support House Bill 530.

Thank you for your time; I'd be happy to answer any questions.