



**HB 444 - Township Omnibus Bill  
Proponent Testimony  
May 5, 2020**

**State of Ohio Legislature – House State & Local Government Committee**

Honorable Chairman Wiggam, Vice Chair Stephens, Ranking Member Kelly, and members of the House State and Local Government Committee, I am Larry Burks, West Chester Township Administrator. Thank you for allowing me to appear before you today.

West Chester Township is a community of more than 63,000 citizens, 3,600 businesses and covers about 35 square miles. I am proud to represent the largest Township in the State of Ohio.

Our residents benefit from a full-service community with police, fire & EMS and 911 emergency communications. Our residents have supported this exceptional level of service through the ballot box.

West Chester is seeking the committee's support of HB444's inclusion of changes related to Division (JJ) of Ohio Revised Code 5705. This change gives taxpayers the option to consider a continuous joint public safety levy if placed before them on the ballot.

Providing for the safety of our community is a core competency. Safety is THE most important thing we do as servant leaders and speaks to the most basic requisites when creating a great community.

Current Ohio Revised Code language allows for joint public safety levies, but limits the term to five years. Police levies can be continuous and fire levies can be continuous. Public safety levies, however, cannot be continuous under current legislation. This unnecessary limit on continuing joint public safety levies benefits neither the taxpayer nor the services they fund and demand.

Mitigating risk is at the heart of public safety services and yet dependency on a five-year cycle of funding is riddled with risk. Staffing plans, equipment replacement and responding to the basic demands for public safety in a community are long-term considerations and are at risk every time these agencies return to the ballot box.

A trip to the voting booth is impacted by larger economic conditions and even political interests beyond the control of those who provide for the community's safety. A failure of a levy can cause an immediate reduction in services not easily articulated or understood until enacted. Significant cuts in critical services are the potential reality each and every time a levy proposition is necessary.

West Chester has proven that local commitment to this core competency, managed responsibly, can be very effective. West Chester last went to the voters for a fire levy in 2006 and a police levy in 2010. We have right-sized our public safety operations and don't anticipate growth. Even continuation of current services,

however, will require a trip back to voters because levy collections, despite new economic development, will not keep up with the increased costs of providing the same service we do today.

West Chester has achieved great longevity in levy life. As good stewards of taxpayer money and in the interests of NOT having to return to voters frequently; West Chester has worked early in levy life to build fund balances to carry forward as levy collections are less able to cover the inevitable cost increases in providing the service.

When the time comes to ask voters for support, West Chester and other townships are in the position of placing separate issues on the ballot.

In West Chester, separate police and fire levies support each individual service with the two levies sharing financial responsibility for the 911 Communications Center. Placing two separate levies on a ballot places unnecessary competition in the way of providing for our community's safety.

A win for both levies is great, but there is a real likelihood that voters will choose one over another. This fractures the overall public safety interests of the community and hinders the funding of local 911 communications. If one levy fails, all three departments suffer.

Breaking down the barriers for public safety funding and extending the "continuous" option for joint public safety levies gives local control and allows the community to focus on providing the best safety services to residents. Allowing this joint public safety levy to be continuous, rather than limited to five years, promotes better long-term planning and budgeting for critical services with confidence in funding levels.

Ultimately, by accepting this change and allowing continuous joint public safety levies, there is no added impact to the wallets of our voters because their tax liability will be the same amount until we, the Township, return to the voters for further needed increases. The dollars collected from this continuous joint public safety levy would still be utilized for the same services outlined in sections (I) for Fire and (J) for Police as promised to the voters at the time of passage.

The "continuous" aspect of the levy incentivizes communities to be fiscally responsible every year to avoid the risk associated with going to the voters for increases, and offers a significant advantage in not facing a possible outcome of zero collections every fifth year.

We see no compelling reason to withhold the option of asking voters for a continuous public safety levy. We do see great benefit for our Township, and others, in being better prepared and better able to plan and account for future spending ensuring our residents receive the best public safety services possible within available resources.

Thank you for the consideration. And thank you for your service to the great state of Ohio.

In service of the Township,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Larry D. Burks".

Larry D. Burks, MPA, CED, ICMA-CM

Township Administrator, West Chester, OH