

Testimony of Woody Woodward
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Ohio Parks and Recreation Association
Ohio House State and Local Government Committee
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Chairman Wiggam and members of the House State and Local Government Committee. Thank you for allowing me to present written testimony this morning in objection to House Bill 476 on behalf of our more than 2,000 members around the state.

Among our members are Metropolitan Park Districts which have been providing memorable outdoor experiences for Ohioans for more than 100 years. Like many around Ohio, these districts have faced new challenges in recent weeks. However, their challenge has been different. Since mid-March, Metroparks around the state have seen a tremendous growth in visitors—in some cases those increases have been more than 300%. Throughout Ohio, park districts continue to work to ensure that residents can enjoy Metroparks safely during these unique times.

Ohio voters continue to support the work of Metroparks in overwhelming numbers. In the past ten years, more than 90% of Metroparks levies have been approved by voters, with an average percentage of more than 64% in favor.

For us then, House Bill 476 appears to be a statewide solution to a local problem. We are aware of the situation in Mahoning County. The park district and landowners continue to work through a legal process that has been prescribed by the General Assembly.

We are unaware of one other instance in Ohio where eminent domain has been an issue. And I include Stark County, where notwithstanding what you heard two weeks ago, the park district has not been involved in an eminent domain case with a resident for at least 20 years. According to a February 9 editorial in the *Canton Repository*, "Eminent domain sounds ominous, and on social media with the current state of political discord in the country, becomes even more menacing. It is, however, simply not true that Stark Parks misuses this legal tool."

House Bill 476 would subject Metropolitan Park District decisions to the decisions of other governmental entities setting a dangerous precedent. Part of the success of Metropark Districts in Ohio for more than a century comes from their distance from the political process. This bill would subject the decisions of a park board to an elected political authority.

Local control already exists with the probate judge having the current authority to appoint park commissioners, and, the ultimate local control already exists because park districts must periodically face voters in order to receive continuing funding for operations. As I have shared, support for the work of those districts has been overwhelming.

Eminent domain is a rarely used tool which allows park districts to identify and negotiate with absentee owner of property which has generally been abandoned. Subjecting this tool to a vote of an additional authority will make it more difficult for park districts to provide amenities that their residents and your constituents are demanding.

Thank you for your time and attention. Please do not hesitate to reach out to me if I can provide additional information.