**Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee**

**March 1, 2017**

**Testimony of OpenNEO**

**Executive Director, Jill Miller Zimon**

Chairman Coley, Vice Chair Uecker, and Ranking Member Yuko, thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony this morning on Senate Bill 44, on behalf of OpenNEO.

OpenNEO is an Ohio nonprofit organization located in Cleveland. It is committed to improving access to public data, or as it is often called, open data. OpenNEO launched in December 2014 with a mission to build on our community’s growing interest in this area of public information. We provide several levels of education about open data, open data standards, case studies and best practices. We also seek to help local governments pursue open data in a collaborative, regional fashion. Our end goal is for local governments to embrace open data policy and implementation very much like the kind of policy and practice promoted by Senator LaRose’s legislation which you are considering today. We believe Senate Bill 44 is a much-needed opportunity to make government meaningful in people’s lives, update government infrastructure to respond to the demands of the 21st century, and save money while doing so.

As an advocate for access to already public data, OpenNEO sees Senator LaRose’s bill as necessary and needed because, in spite of the best efforts and commitments to government transparency made by entities that hold public data, such as county Boards of Election, local public data, such as campaign finance records, remain largely unpublished. And, sadly, the data that are published are rarely machine-readable – the standard format designated for digital forms of public data.

This reality leads to a lack of user-friendly tools for our computers and apps – or applications – for our increasingly smaller mobile devices, which rely on machine-readable public data. This then makes data far less accessible than what we expect as the standard for public information. Indeed, currently, even though some local election boards provide public online access to campaign finance records in the form of PDF documents, this “locked” document format hampers the aggregation and translation of election data because it is not being provided as machine-readable – that is, data that can be searched.

As of February 27, 2017, across the ten largest counties in Ohio, only seven were posting campaign finance data online at all: Cuyahoga, Franklin, Summit, Montgomery, Lucas, Butler and Mahoning. The remaining three counties — Hamilton, Stark, and Lorain, collectively serving more than 1.5 million residents — did not have campaign finance archives online. Most notably, however, not one of these ten counties posts data in machine-readable or searchable formats.

What SB 44 seeks to make standard for those county Boards of Election is the standard already in use at the Secretary of State level of campaign finance reporting: electronic submission of campaign finance records that is then machine readable and searchable through a very user-friendly database.

Specifically, the Secretary of State’s campaign finance database provides information that is searchable by term, candidate, election cycle, keyword and other categories. These characteristics make it easy for users to make sense of the data, and they support applications that rely on machine-readable data. Senate Bill 44 simply seeks to apply this at the local level.

To summarize, Ohio’s local campaign finance data landscape currently lags far behind the secretary of state’s model. Senator LaRose’s bill will enhance Ohioans’ ability to access, see and search what is already public information precisely in the same ways the Secretary of State’s database allows us currently to access, see and search statewide campaign finance records. Updating the local campaign-finance-data landscape in this way will better connect citizens with the public information they need to contribute to the health of their communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and for the leadership demonstrated in this legislation. I am available to provide more comments or testimony at your request.