My name is Liz Gerstenhaber, and I live in Rocky River.  I’ll just put this out there: I’m about as liberal as they come, and I probably disagreed with the way most of you voted 85% of the time in the last year.  But I refuse to believe that everyone in this room isn’t someone who thinks the democratic principles on which this country was founded aren’t the best way to govern.  I refuse to believe that even if we want for our party or candidate to win, that we don’t deep down want that candidate to win fair and square.  Can anyone really argue that competitive elections don’t make for the strongest countries?  That healthy competition doesn’t make for the best product? Right now Ohio can be a leader for how the country can come together, or it can contribute to it slow and painful demise.

Scores of those bills that I just mentioned, that I probably disagreed with you on, come down to the same issue: freedom.  Maybe access to firearms makes you feel free and maybe access to abortions makes you feel free.  These are nuanced issues, upon which I may disagree with you about what ensures freedom.  But this issue, redistricting, fair representation through competitive elections, doesn’t have a lot of gray. We either come up with the fairest, most balanced system we can possibly conceive of, or we don’t.

I ask you to ask yourselves, is SJR5 the fairest way to make these choices?  Ask yourselves if this bill is the reason that you got into politics and the reason that you choose to serve your community, your country. Is this bill upholding the democratic principles that all of us, regardless of party, hold dearer than anything else on which we vote?

Ask yourselves the real reason for a special election on May 8th.  Or the real reason for excluding the governor from vetoing the redistricted map, or the supreme court from ruling on it, or the potential for a public referendum.  Ask yourselves the real reason for keeping rural counties intact while splitting urban counties multiple times where you deem necessary, when mathematically it is entirely possible to keep most communities together and divide urban counties just once.  Or why the current, unbalanced general assembly would decide on the plan, instead of using a commission from the beginning as the voters previously approved; or why the commission to whom the can gets kicked only needs a simple majority to pass the plan, and not the buy-in of both members of the minority party on the committee, again, as the voters already approved.

If you feel that I’m misinterpreting this, then I urge you to consider the convoluted language in this proposal, and how much interpretation to which it will be subject if it is actually in play. Is this the kind of language that ensures the balanced process we need? Is this the kind of language that simplifies the process or does it invite litigation? From where I sit, it appears that the majority party is looking to tie up the process in order to keep the status quo.

I am pleading with you to prove me wrong: let SJR5 go, and throw your support behind the proposal put forward by Fair Congressional Districts for OH. The Fair Districts’ proposal includes all of the necessary checks and balances, and perhaps most importantly, it has a very clear language that ensures a bipartisan plan.

We have all become so entrenched among party lines.  I’m certainly not exempt from this.  But I have to believe that if I were in your shoes, that if I were a legislator who is part of a comfortable majority with the opportunity to further my party’s wins, that I would still work to find the fairest process for forming districts.  The more power one party has, the more extremism can rise and the more polarized we become.

The voters that elected you to make crucial decisions about our lives also voted by a 70% majority for process of General Assembly redistricting that was extremely similar the Fair Congressional Districts proposal for congressional districts. If you were truly here to serve the voters of Ohio, then why not use the same language that they have already approved?  Show us, the voters, that you believe in the same democracy that we do; that this country isn’t that divided; and that we’re actually on the same team when it comes to at least one thing: fair elections.

If I can’t go in the voting booth and know that my vote means something, and that I can in fact be part of choosing who represents my values, then I have nothing, we have nothing, because we have no longer have a democracy.  Ask yourselves if SJR5 will help secure our democracy.

There is one last thing I want to say: I don’t work in anything having to do with the law.   I’m a stay at home mom, and I’ve never done anything like this before.  I’m ashamed to say that my civic engagement before the 2016 election consisted of voting.  But thanks to Donald Trump and the extremists that he has emboldened, I am awake.  I know that what I’m saying may not change your mind, just as my daily phone calls to my legislators won’t change the way they vote on bills.  But I’m writing to you today so that you know that I am listening to what you say, and I am watching what you support and how you vote. And I am not alone in this, I am just one of a few people who had time to say that we are paying attention.

Thank you for listening.