Senate Finance Committee

House Bill 166 Testimony

May 22, 2019

Good morning, Chairman Dolan, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the Senate Finance Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on House Bill (HB) 166, the biennial budget bill for FY20-21.

My name is Pam Hickson-Stevenson. I serve as the director of the Akron-Summit County Public Library and am a member of the Ohio Library Council’s Government Relations Committee. I’m honored to be here today to discuss Ohio’s public libraries and the vital role we play in our local communities.

The Akron-Summit County Public Library serves a population of more than 375,000 Ohioans with 19 locations, two bookmobiles, a lobby-stop box truck, and a books-by-mail service. In 2018, we circulated nearly 4.6 million items in digital and physical formats. The public visited us approximately 2.2 million times, used our computers and Wi-Fi 1.4 million times and used our mobile app 4.3 million times. Our dedicated and talented librarians provided more than 8,500 programs, which enjoyed a total attendance of more than 400,000. None of this would have been possible without our funding through the Public Library Fund, a demonstration of the commitment that the state of Ohio has made to its citizens.

I would like to share a few examples of how our library is serving our community and Ohio’s taxpayers.

**We are involved in a county-wide effort to distribute drug deactivation pouches that play an important role in fighting the opioid epidemic.** Because we are a new member of the Summit County Community Partnership distribution network for Deterra pouches, we provide a convenient and friendly location for people to obtain a safe and responsible way to dispose of unneeded medication, with an emphasis on unused opiates. The pouches require only water to render medications safe for landfills. Since August 31, 2016, approximately 65,000 pouches have been distributed through the network. We are very pleased to be part of the battle against the opioid epidemic.

**We provide opportunities for youth and adults to gain technology skills.** Students enjoy STEM and STEAM learning programs on topics such as Ozobots and algorithms, that our youth librarians plan. We’re especially proud of being part of the Girls Who Code national network of clubs. Teenage girls who participate in these free after-school programs learn concepts that form the basis for all programming languages. This initiative is designed to teach girls, in a fun and friendly environment, the skills needed for a career in computing, where currently fewer than 1 in 5 computer science graduates are women. We also offer a regular schedule of classes led by Library technology trainers who teach topics ranging from basic computer skills to Microsoft Office products to library apps.

Our TechZone@Main has been helping the community since June 2016 through a variety of services and equipment. The TechZone is the Library’s makerspace, a place for making, learning, exploring, and sharing. We offer two recording studios, a green screen room, design computers, a laser engraver, a vinyl printer/cutter, a media transfer station, and more. Hip-hop musician Floco Torres produced most of his latest album in our studios. Microbusiness owners, non-profit staff, entrepreneurs, artists, hobbyists, and families have all used the TechZone and have spread the news about this wonderful community resource.

**We are anchor members of Summit County’s 2020 Census Complete Count Committee.** Summit County Executive Ilene Shapiro and City of Akron Mayor Dan Horrigan formed the Committee in October 2018. I serve on the Committee along with representatives from non-profits, educational institutions, and local government. The Library has already been playing an important role by offering space for training and by promoting employment opportunities with the U.S. Census Bureau. We will continue our support of a complete count by providing access to internet-accessible computers and Wi-Fi as the U.S. Census Bureau offers an online option for the first time and encourages online responses as the primary way to participate. Additionally, we will be involved in promotion, awareness, and outreach so that everyone is counted.

**The Akron-Summit County Public Library is a critically important organizational member of the community.** And I believe the same is true for public libraries throughout our wonderful state. While we certainly still provide traditional services and programs, Ohio’s public libraries have evolved and responded to a variety of community needs and interests. Funding from the State of Ohio through the Public Library Fund is key to our ability to deliver those needed and wanted services. We cannot provide these services without state funding.

Our state funding through the Public Library Fund has been cut by 23% since 2001. This has resulted in a reduction in services to the local community, including reduced hours that haven’t been completely restored, abbreviated hours at our newest branch, and deferred and delayed much-needed maintenance and repair on buildings. We urge you to restore the Public Library Fund to 1.7% in your substitute bill.

Thank you for your time, attention, and consideration.