

Testimony to the Senate General Government and Agency Review Committee 5/15/19.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak to this committee this afternoon. I am here as a proponent of, and in full support of, the Ohio Department of Natural Resources' proposed budget for the Division of Natural Areas and Preserves and the Scenic Rivers program that are part of House Bill 166.

I am a member of the Little Beaver Creek Wild and Scenic River Advisory Council, which is a local, volunteer advisory council in Columbiana County. There is a local advisory council for each of the 15 designated scenic rivers in Ohio. Folks who live in the watershed of each of these streams and have some knowledge of, and expertise, on issues affecting these streams, volunteer their time to serve on these councils and advise the Ohio Department of Natural Resources on the best way to protect these streams.

I have been lobbying for protection of our Scenic Rivers since 2016 when I was heavily involved in the effort to keep the local advisory councils. ODNR proposed at that time to dissolve the local councils and create one statewide council. Thank goodness that proposal was not approved. I was involved in the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Scenic Rivers Act in 2018 in the rotunda here at the Statehouse. I am still involved in this effort through my leadership with the Ohio Scenic Rivers Association (OSRA), a statewide ad hoc group at this time, to lead the way in protecting our precious Scenic Rivers. Hope Taft and others are also involved in the leadership of OSRA. The group intends to pursue non-profit status in the future.

The proposed budget that ODNR has submitted for the Division of Natural Areas and Preserves will right the "wrongs" that our "most intact and fully functional ecosystems remaining in the State of Ohio" have been subjected to for the last 8 years. The Scenic Rivers fit this description since they are truly long linear natural areas. The proposal to re-establish the DNAP and re-unite Scenic Rivers with it only makes sense. They are two programs with the same mission. The proposed budget increase for the newly established DNAP will allow for an increase in management, education, and general maintenance of Ohio's natural and unique ecosystems that are sorely needed. This small investment of GRF monies would allow for the expansion of additional preserves, additional conservation easements, and additional Scenic River designations that would further protect these last remnants of "our most intact and fully functional ecosystems". Some of these preserves and Scenic Rivers provide the only known remaining habitat in the state for many endangered species. The Hellbender salamander is a great example. One of the largest populations of Hellbenders left in Ohio is found in Little Beaver Creek.

A lot of momentum has been generated in the last several years for our Scenic Rivers by saving the local advisory councils and the 50th anniversary celebration of the Scenic River Act last year. We need to keep that momentum going for the next 50 years and longer! ODNR's proposal to bring back together Natural Areas and Preserves, and Scenic Rivers, with increased dedicated funding, is a blessing for all of the citizens of Ohio who care about the great outdoors. In today's world research has shown the many psychological, physical, and cognitive benefits of nature connection. What better way for our citizens to make that natural connection than in some of the most beautiful places left in Ohio!

It is my hope that this committee will agree and approve ODNR's proposed budget for the Division of Natural Areas and Preserves. Thank you.