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HOUSE INFRASTRUCTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

HOUSE BILL 101 – PROPONENT TESTIMONY

March 3, 2021

Dave Wilson
Guernsey County Commissioner
County Commissioners Association of Ohio

Good morning Chairman Stoltzfus, Vice Chair Dean, Ranking Member Brown, and Members of the House Infrastructure and Rural Development Committee. My name is Dave Wilson. I am in my second term as a Guernsey County Commissioner. I am here today representing the County Commissioners Association of Ohio (CCAO) to express our support for House Bill 101, which will provide an ongoing, long-term process by which the state can help counties with one of their most urgent needs – the replacement and renovation of our aging jail facilities. We are grateful to the bill sponsors, Representative Jason Stephens and Representative Jay Edwards, and their 23 co-sponsors, for bringing legislation forward to address this crucial issue.

Counties provide the foundation for the administration of the justice system in Ohio. Counties devote the majority of their general fund budgets for this purpose, and the operation and maintenance of the county jail is typically the largest single expense in criminal justice administration.

In 2019, CCAO and the Buckeye State Sheriffs' Association surveyed their members about their jail construction and renovation needs. Our members told us that they will require \$1.3 billion statewide over the next five years to bring their facilities up to DRC standards. Problems with aging and inadequate facilities exist across the state, and in counties of all sizes. CCAO is grateful for the \$50 million included in the most recent capital budget passed in the 133rd General Assembly, but the legislation did not establish an ongoing commitment from the state. Given the vast financial requirements involved, we believe that ongoing state assistance is necessary in order to help counties meet their jail facility needs in a comprehensive and timely manner.

House Bill 101 is modeled after the capital funding formula used for Ohio schools to establish a mechanism by which the state will prioritize funding for jail construction projects. The Department of Rehabilitation and Correction will conduct an assessment of jail facilities to identify those with the greatest need for

replacement or repair. The state's cost share for the project will be based on an assessment of property valuation and sales tax capacity, so that the state share of the project will be greatest in counties with the least financial capacity. Counties will be required to demonstrate an ironclad financial commitment before the project can move forward, and the Ohio Facilities Construction Commission (OFCC) will bring its project management expertise to the entire process, from start to finish.

The state has not had an ongoing capital construction program to assist county jails since 2003. We believe that it is time to strengthen the state-county partnership by taking this step. House Bill 101 uses a proven approach to prioritize needs and manage projects effectively while safeguarding taxpayer dollars. CCAO members are reviewing the specific details of the financial needs formula in the bill in order to understand its implications for individual counties. We look forward to working with the sponsors and with the committee to iron out the details of the language so the bill can be favorably reported.

With respect to Guernsey County, we have been tackling the daunting challenge of expanding our county jail for over 10 years. We believe that this long-term program will help us, and other counties, finally be able to provide a safe and secure setting for the county's inmate population.

While, at its core, the need for jail construction is nearly universal for Ohio's counties, Guernsey County is in a uniquely challenging situation. We are the only rural county in the State of Ohio bisected by not one but two Interstate Highways: I-70 and I-77. For those trafficking in illicit drugs, we are easily accessible from Cleveland, Akron-Canton, Columbus, Pittsburgh and points beyond.

In other words, we must deal with "big city drug traffic" on a "small county budget" and I'd like to offer a couple of circumstances that validate that statement.

- The Guernsey County Sheriff's Office, along with six other Sheriff's Offices, a number of police departments and the State Highway Patrol, is part of the seven-county Central Ohio Drug Enforcement - or "CODE" - Task Force. However, the Governor of Ohio requested our Sheriff's Office be a part of the state's "Bulk Task Force", which exists for the purpose of eradicating large-scale drug trafficking. Our county was selected specifically because of our two Interstate Highways and our large number of hotels.
- Late last summer, a member of The Outlaws Motorcycle Club purchased a house in Cambridge. In case you are not familiar, the club has 700 members in 86 chapters and is centered in the upper Midwest, where they compete with Hells Angels for members. Some Outlaws chapter members have been accused of

murder and kidnapping, and federal authorities say they believe much of the club's money is generated through the manufacture and distribution of methamphetamine. While there has yet to be a problem in our county related to The Outlaws, please keep in mind it is *still* winter and not yet motorcycling weather.

As you can see, we really *are* dealing with “big city drug traffic” on a “small county budget.”

The current Guernsey County Jail opened in 1994 with officials at that time believing that 66 beds - 54 for men and 12 for women - would serve the county indefinitely. But, in 1994, no one even *dreamed* that we'd be dealing with a drug epidemic on the scale we are now, or that females would average a 40% share of the jail's population!

Over the past six years, as the drug epidemic continued to grow, our jail population grew right along with it, reaching unprecedented levels literally double the building's designed capacity. In fact, it's estimated that 95% of those incarcerated are there either directly or indirectly because of drugs

While the average daily population fell to just under 60 in the early days of the pandemic, we are seeing it inch up once again, housing 98 inmates weekend before last and 92 after this past weekend. Pre-COVID, we saw the population swell to over 130.

We have done our best to adapt to our sustained spike in incarcerations with a dedicated, experienced and professional jail staff. We have converted our indoor recreation area into a female dorm, built shower and bathroom facilities for women and installed a body scanner, which has all but eliminated contraband. Our inspection record has been solid with the lack of capacity the only consistent black mark.

We are hopeful that passage of this essential bill will provide the funds necessary to create the jail capacity we so sorely need!

Mr. Chairman, and members of the Committee, thank you for allowing me this opportunity to testify in support of HB 101. I would be pleased to answer any questions that you may have.