

ASHTABULA COUNTY  
COMMISSIONERS  
J. P. Ducro IV  
Casey R. Kozlowski  
Kathryn L. Whittington



25 W. Jefferson St.  
Jefferson, OH 44047-1092  
Phone: (440) 576-3750  
Fax: (440) 576-2344  
commissioners@ashtabulacounty.us

*Where great things happen.*

**May 7, 2024**

### **Testimony in Support of House Bill 413**

Honorable Chair Hillyer, Vice-Chair Mathews, Ranking Member Isaacsohn, and members of the House Civil Justice Committee, I extend my appreciation for the opportunity to present testimony in support of House Bill 413, addressing reforms pertaining to the Ashtabula County and Conneaut Municipal Courts.

My name is Casey Kozlowski, and I am honored to serve as a County Commissioner in Ashtabula County, Ohio. I have had the privilege of spearheading the initiative that has led to the formulation of the legislation currently under your consideration.

House Bill 413 is straightforward, aiming to achieve two fundamental objectives. First, it endeavors to merge two county courts, each serving distinct jurisdictions and currently presided over by part-time judges, into a unified court led by a full-time judge. Secondly, it seeks to refine the jurisdictional boundaries of the newly formed County Court, facilitating the transfer of cases from the territories of North Kingsville, Kingsville, Monroe, and Sheffield townships to the Conneaut Municipal Court.

This legislation is the culmination of collaboration with multiple stakeholders across our county. We have engaged in productive dialogue with the three judges directly affected by this legislation, all of whom have lent their support to our endeavor. Additionally, we have forged partnerships with governmental leaders and legislative bodies, hosted a public hearing where unanimous support was voiced, and sought guidance from the Ohio Supreme Court through a comprehensive study.

Allow me to underscore some points from our collaborative efforts and the findings of the Ohio Supreme Court (attached to my testimony):

- The 2020 census indicates that Ashtabula County's population stands at 97,574, reflecting a modest decline of 3.9% since 2010 and 5% since 2000.
- The courts currently serve a population of 54,032 (Ashtabula County court), 31,224 (Ashtabula Municipal Court), and 12,318 (Conneaut Municipal Court).
- Notably, both Conneaut Municipal Court and Ashtabula County Courts exhibit modest caseload volumes, ranking within the bottom quartile of municipal caseloads statewide, while Ashtabula Municipal Court aligns with the median caseload per judge across Ohio.

Should House Bill 413 come to fruition, we anticipate the following changes:

- Ashtabula County Court's caseload will be reduced to a manageable 46,004 population.
- Conneaut Municipal Court's territory will experience a 65.2% expansion, accompanied by a 14.9% reduction in Ashtabula County Court's territory.
- Conneaut Municipal Court would still be in the low end concerning the range in civil, traffic, and total caseloads. The incoming caseload would position it in the 25th percentile.
- The Ashtabula County Court would have civil and criminal caseloads in the second quartile, with traffic and total caseloads falling in the bottom quartile.

From a fiscal standpoint, our Board of Commissioners foresees considerable savings, through the conversion of a part-time judgeship to a full-time position, the elimination of a Court Administrator role, potential reductions in clerk positions through attrition, and the optimization of court facilities. It's estimated through our county administrator that we would yield annual savings of \$250,000+.

The Supreme Court concluded in their analysis the following statement, of which I would like to read to you:

Based on the foregoing analyses, the current caseload in Ashtabula County Court—with or without a reduction in its territorial jurisdiction—should not present any challenges for a single full-time judge to manage effectively. From a judicial resource needs perspective, the proposed expansion of Conneaut Municipal Court's territory is sensible and should not present any challenges for a single full-time judge to manage effectively. The general assembly and supreme court staff have long been supportive of a full-time judiciary and the consequent elimination of part-time judgeships.

Moreover, allow me to point out key aspects of this legislation:

- The ongoing Eastern County court seat election will proceed as scheduled, ensuring continuity for a full 6-year term.
- The forthcoming election for the western county court judge seat in 2028 will serve a two-year term.
- A new consolidated court judge will be elected in November 2030, poised to assume office on January 1, 2031.

In summary, House Bill 413 represents a pragmatic approach to enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of our court system, yielding taxpayer savings while ensuring enhanced delivery of public services. I respectfully ask for your favorable passage of House Bill 413.

Once again, thank you to Chair Hillyer, Vice-Chair Mathews, Ranking Member Isaacsohn, and the members of the House Civil Justice Committee for affording me the opportunity to share my testimony today. I am happy to address any questions or comments you may have.

Regards,

Casey Kozlowski



## THE SUPREME COURT of OHIO COURT SERVICES

### Analysis of Proposed Reorganization of the Limited Jurisdiction Trial Courts in Ashtabula County

---

This report has been prepared in response to a request from the Board of Commissioners of Ashtabula County for the Supreme Court of Ohio's assistance in evaluating organizational alternatives in the county's limited jurisdiction trial courts.

In the board's letter to the Supreme Court dated January 19, 2023, the members requested a study of the caseloads and judgeship needs in the Ashtabula County Court and also raised the idea of altering the territorial jurisdiction of Conneaut Municipal Court. In support of its request, the board provided copies of letters from Judge Harold Specht and Judge Casey O'Brien of the Ashtabula County Court in which both indicated their general support of the study. In addition, the board provided a copy of a letter from Judge Nicholas Iarocci of Conneaut Municipal Court in which he proposes the reorganization study include the possible expansion of his court's territorial jurisdiction. Colleen O'Toole, Ashtabula County Prosecuting Attorney, sent a letter to Supreme Court staff expressing her support of the board's request for the study.

#### *Courts and Judgeships*

Statutes currently provide for three limited jurisdiction trial courts in Ashtabula County with a total of four judgeships. See Table 1. The two judges in the Ashtabula County Court have opted under R.C. 1907.15 to create areas of separate jurisdiction. Judge Specht sits in the court's Eastern District and Judge O'Brien sits in the court's Western District. None of the limited jurisdiction trial court judges in Ashtabula County are precluded under the Ohio Constitution's age limit for judges from running for an additional term.

**Table 1. Limited Jurisdiction Courts and Judgeships**

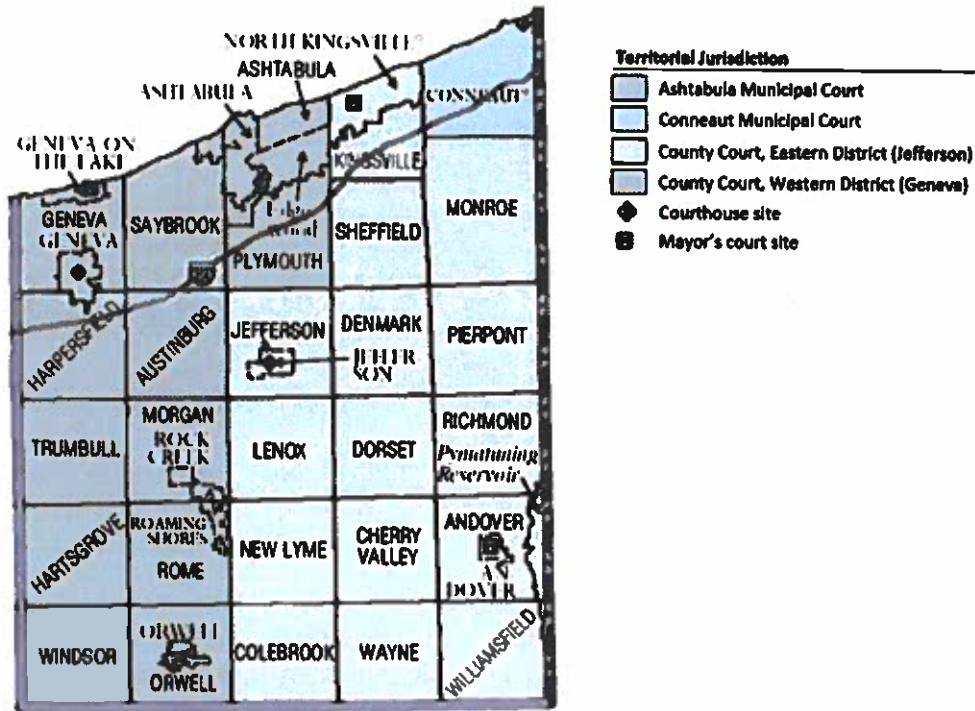
Court	Judge	Service Start	Term End	Age at Next
				Term Start
Ashtabula County Court, Eastern District	Specht, Harold E.	01/01/19	12/31/24	66
Ashtabula County Court, Western District	O'Brien, Casey	01/01/23	12/31/28	53
Ashtabula Municipal Court	DiGiacomo, Laura	02/27/15	12/31/25	58
Conneaut Municipal Court	Iarocci, Nicholas	01/01/20	12/31/25	62

#### *Territorial Jurisdiction*

Shown below in Figure 1 is a map showing the territorial boundaries of the limited jurisdiction trial courts in Ashtabula County. As noted above, the district of the Ashtabula County Court has been divided into two areas of separate jurisdiction, with the Eastern District hearing cases arising out of an area covering roughly the eastern three-fifths of the county not otherwise under the jurisdiction of Ashtabula County Municipal Court or Conneaut Municipal Court. Its courthouse is located in the centrally located village of Jefferson. The Western District area court,

hearing cases arising out of the western two-fifths of the county, has its courthouse located in the city of Geneva.

**Figure 1. Limited Jurisdiction Trial Court Territorial Jurisdiction**



**Population Served**

According to the 2020 U.S. Census, Ashtabula County's total population was 97,574 people, a decline of 3.9% from the 2010 U.S. Census, and a 5.0% decline from the 2000 U.S. Census. The total population figures along with the court-level breakdowns are shown below in Table 2.

**Table 2. Population Served**

Court	2000	2010	2020 over		
			2010	2000	
Ashtabula County Court	54,872	55,881	54,032	-3.3%	-1.5%
Ashtabula Municipal Court	35,371	32,775	31,224	-4.7%	-11.7%
Conneaut Municipal Court	12,485	12,841	12,318	-4.1%	-1.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>102,728</b>	<b>101,497</b>	<b>97,574</b>	<b>-3.9%</b>	<b>-5.0%</b>

### Incoming Caseloads

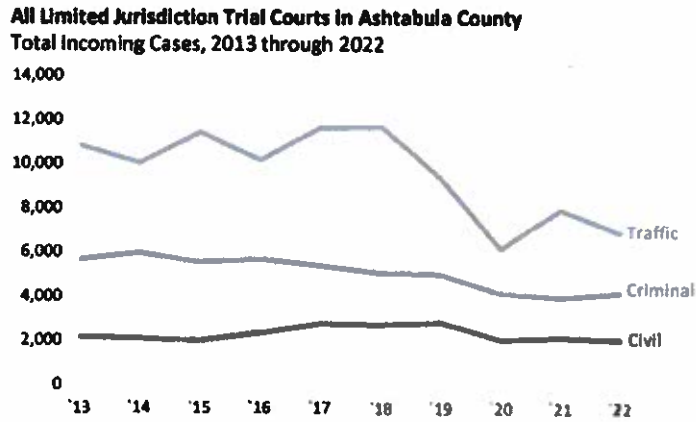
Table 3, below, shows the number of incoming cases (new filings plus reactivations and transfers in) across the three major case type categories in each of the limited jurisdiction courts in Ashtabula County. Included in the table are the averages between 2013 and 2019, and the percentage difference between 2022 over the 2013 to 2019 averages. Due to anomalies in incoming caseloads in 2020 and 2021, those years have been excluded from the long term averages.

With the exception of Ashtabula County Court's civil caseload in the Eastern District area court, incoming caseloads across the board for all of the courts in Ashtabula County have experienced considerable declines. See Figure 2 for a chart showing countywide trends.

**Table 3. Incoming Caseloads, 2013 through 2022**

Court	Case Type	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	AVG 2013 to 2019	2022 over '13 to '19 AVG
Ashtabula CC, E	Civil	413	454	384	387	534	525	607	437	451	481	472	+1.9%
	Criminal	746	860	783	858	755	748	662	579	533	634	773	-18.0%
	Traffic	2,561	1,889	2,183	1,953	2,341	2,556	2,061	1,363	1,728	1,236	2,221	-44.3%
	All Case Types	3,720	3,203	3,350	3,198	3,630	3,829	3,330	2,379	2,712	2,351	3,466	-32.2%
Ashtabula CC, W	Civil	547	509	514	582	681	670	709	554	614	517	602	-14.1%
	Criminal	1,281	1,231	1,150	1,278	1,209	1,178	1,001	607	538	745	1,190	-37.4%
	Traffic	2,123	2,510	2,856	2,300	2,682	3,014	2,118	1,381	1,436	1,280	2,515	-49.1%
	All Case Types	3,951	4,250	4,520	4,160	4,572	4,862	3,828	2,542	2,588	2,542	4,306	-41.0%
Ashtabula CC (Courtwide)	Civil	960	963	898	969	1,215	1,195	1,316	991	1,065	998	1,074	-7.1%
	Criminal	2,027	2,091	1,933	2,136	1,964	1,926	1,663	1,186	1,071	1,379	1,963	-29.7%
	Traffic	4,684	4,399	5,039	4,253	5,023	5,570	4,179	2,744	3,164	2,516	4,735	-46.9%
	All Case Types	7,671	7,453	7,870	7,358	8,202	8,691	7,158	4,921	5,300	4,893	7,772	-37.0%
Ashtabula MC	Civil	966	840	849	1,052	1,242	1,220	1,182	888	887	866	1,050	-17.5%
	Criminal	2,714	2,857	2,811	2,897	2,821	2,640	2,774	2,393	2,423	2,254	2,788	-19.1%
	Traffic	4,090	3,838	4,625	4,320	4,905	4,472	3,956	2,700	3,989	3,553	4,315	-17.7%
	All Case Types	7,770	7,535	8,285	8,269	8,968	8,332	7,912	5,981	7,299	6,673	8,153	-18.2%
Conneaut MC	Civil	254	309	274	342	315	339	337	192	229	213	310	-31.3%
	Criminal	959	1,049	839	674	654	552	605	640	538	617	762	-19.0%
	Traffic	2,083	1,834	1,782	1,628	1,732	1,669	1,224	757	818	862	1,707	-49.5%
	All Case Types	3,296	3,192	2,895	2,644	2,701	2,560	2,166	1,589	1,585	1,692	2,779	-39.1%
Countywide	Civil	2,180	2,112	2,021	2,363	2,772	2,754	2,835	2,071	2,181	2,077	2,434	-14.7%
	Criminal	5,700	5,997	5,583	5,707	5,439	5,118	5,042	4,219	4,032	4,250	5,512	-22.9%
	Traffic	10,857	10,071	11,446	10,201	11,660	11,711	9,359	6,201	7,971	6,931	10,758	-35.6%
	All Case Types	18,737	18,180	19,050	18,271	19,871	19,583	17,236	12,491	14,184	13,258	18,704	-29.1%

**Figure 2. Incoming Caseloads, 2013 through 2022**



**Caseload Comparisons**

When assessing the size of a municipal or county court’s caseload in order to determine its likely judgeship needs, we typically compare the court’s per judge caseload to the per judge caseloads across all municipal courts statewide that have full-time judgeships. Table 4, below, shows the range of incoming cases (new filings plus reactivations and transfers) in 2022 under the three major case type categories heard in municipal and county courts.

**Table 4. Incoming Cases Per Judge in 2022 in All Municipal Courts Statewide with Full-Time Judgeships**

	Civil	Criminal	Traffic	All Cases
Maximum	3,967	6,351	10,148	14,804
75th Percentile	1,592	2,042	5,906	9,246
Median	1,101	1,482	4,406	7,030
25th Percentile	768	1,019	3,064	5,046
Minimum	181	241	430	1,400

In 2022, among all municipal courts with full-time judgeships, the median number of incoming cases per judge was 7,030 cases (1,101 civil; 1,482 criminal; and 4,406 traffic). Against these per judge ranges, we can compare the volume of incoming cases per judge of the limited jurisdiction trial courts in Ashtabula County.

Shown in Table 5, below, are the number of incoming cases per judge in 2022 in each of the courts in Ashtabula County and how they compare—on a percentile basis—with the statewide ranges shown above in Table 4. On a per judge basis, Conneaut Municipal Court and Ashtabula County Court have low volumes on incoming cases. Both courts are ranked well within the bottom quartile of the baseline municipal court caseloads seen across the state.



**Table 5. Comparison of Incoming Cases Per Judge in 2022 between Ashtabula County's Limited Jurisdiction Courts and all Municipal Courts Statewide with Full-Time Judgeships**

Court	Civil		Criminal		Traffic		All Cases	
	Cases	Percentile	Cases	Percentile	Cases	Percentile	Cases	Percentile
Ashtabula MC (one judge)	866	32nd	2,254	79th	3,553	34th	6,673	42nd
Conneaut MC (one judge)	213	2nd	617	8th	862	1st	1,692	1st
Ashtabula CC (two judges)	499	11th	690	11th	1,258	4th	2,447	4th

***Possible Expansion of Conneaut Municipal Court's Territorial Jurisdiction***

Judge Iarocci of Conneaut Municipal Court has expressed his support, and the support of the Conneaut City Council, for the possible expansion of his court's territory. In particular, he suggests consideration of expanding the court's territory to include the village of North Kingsville along with the townships of Kingsville, Monroe, and Sheffield. If Conneaut Municipal Court's territory were expanded in this manner, the courts in Ashtabula County would instead serve the populations shown in Table 6, below.

**Table 6. Comparison of Incoming Cases Per Judge in 2022**

Court	2020	2020	Change from Current
	Current	Alternative	
Ashtabula County Court	54,032	46,004	-14.9%
Ashtabula Municipal Court	31,224	31,224	0.0%
Conneaut Municipal Court	12,318	20,346	+65.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>97,574</b>	<b>97,574</b>	<b>0.0%</b>

Adding the populations of the village of North Kingsville and the townships of Kingsville, Monroe, and Sheffield to Conneaut Municipal Court's territory and subtracting those populations from territory of the Ashtabula County Court produces a 65.2% increase in Conneaut Municipal Court's territory and a 14.9% reduction in Ashtabula County Court's territory.

We are unable to ascertain the proportions of a municipal or county court's total caseload that originate out of the individual municipalities and townships in its territory. Unfortunately, the caseload statistics the Supreme Court collects from courts under Sup.R. 37 are not broken down in that manner. However, we do know the populations of each municipality and township that are within a municipal or county court's territory. If we assume population size and caseload size are generally comparable, we can use the populations of those various municipalities and townships as proxies for caseload.

If Conneaut Municipal Court's incoming caseload in 2022 had been enlarged by 65.2% (the increase in population served), it would still be ranked relatively very low compared to statewide baselines. The court would be near the low end of the range in civil, traffic, and total caseload. The court's incoming criminal caseload would be raised a non-trivial amount, placing it at the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile. See Table 7, below.

**Table 7. Projected Incoming Cases Per Judge in 2022 with Altered Territories and a Judgeship Reduction in Ashtabula County Court**

Court	Civil		Criminal		Traffic		All Cases	
	Cases	Percentile	Cases	Percentile	Cases	Percentile	Cases	Percentile
Conneaut MC (one judge; expanded territory)	352	6th	1,019	25th	1,424	5th	2,795	5th
Ashtabula CC (one judge; reduced territory)	850	31st	1,174	35th	2,142	12th	4,166	13th
Ashtabula CC (one judge; no change in territory)	998	43rd	1,379	45th	2,516	18th	4,893	23rd

Table 7 also shows the impact of the territorial changes upon Ashtabula County Court—if the court were also to be comprised of a single judgeship. If Ashtabula County Court had a 14.9% reduction in its population served and consisted of a single judgeship, it would be projected to have civil and criminal caseloads in the second quartile compared to statewide ranges and have traffic and total caseloads in the bottom quartile.

**Conclusion**

Based on the foregoing analyses, the current caseload in Ashtabula County Court—with or without a reduction in its territorial jurisdiction—should not present any challenges for a single full-time judge to manage effectively. From a judicial resource needs perspective, the proposed expansion of Conneaut Municipal Court’s territory is sensible and should also not present any challenges for a single full-time judge to manage effectively. The General Assembly and Supreme Court staff have long been supportive of a full-time judiciary and the consequent elimination of part-time judgeships.

Supreme Court staff encourages the Board of Commissioners of Ashtabula County and the entire Ashtabula County judiciary to consider examining options for a countywide reorganization of the county’s limited jurisdiction trial courts. The ongoing monitoring of incoming caseload trends will be essential to understanding Ashtabula County’s needs for sufficient judicial and court resources to ensure the public’s ability to access justice in the most reasonably cost-efficient and effective manner.