

**Testimony before the Ohio House Economic and Workforce Development Committee
in support of H.B. 469 to Create the Ohio River Commission**

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Tuesday, December 3, 2024

Chairman Lorenz, Vice Chairman Santucci, Ranking Member Upchurch, and esteemed members of the committee:

Thank you for providing the opportunity to testify in strong support of HB 469, a pivotal piece of legislation that will establish the Ohio River Commission. This initiative represents a transformative step toward revitalizing Ohio's river counties and bolstering the state's workforce and economic development.

The Ohio River has long been an underutilized asset in our state's economic framework - frankly, it is our state's largest unpaved highway. HB 469 presents an opportunity to turn the tide for communities along the river, many of which have faced persistent economic depression. With the establishment of the Ohio River Commission, these counties can better capitalize on opportunities for economic growth, infrastructure improvements, and job creation.

One of the most compelling examples of progress already underway can be seen through the Ohio Department of Development's Brownfield grant program. This program has facilitated significant investments into sites along the Ohio River, converting blighted and contaminated properties into valuable assets ripe for redevelopment. For example, these grants have already spurred private investments in advanced manufacturing and technology, setting the stage for long-term economic growth. The revitalization of these sites, coupled with strategic public-private partnerships, demonstrates the immense potential of river counties to thrive when given targeted support and resources.

Moreover, the recent announcement of the Inland Waterways Maritime Academy in Monroe County underscores the critical role of workforce development in this transformation. As Ohio's first river maritime academy, this institution will offer essential training and certification programs tailored to the needs of the maritime industry. Current river industry employees, displaced coal miners, young adults seeking to begin a career, and workers from industries impacted by closures in Appalachia will all benefit from these programs, which prepare individuals for careers on the river. With starting salaries and benefits packages exceeding \$50,000 annually, these opportunities not only enhance workforce readiness but also provide a viable pathway to financial stability for Ohioans, especially those in Appalachia.

The creation of the Ohio River Commission will serve as a bridge between industry and workforce development efforts. By offering critical insight into industry employment needs and trends, the Commission will ensure that training programs - such as those offered by the Inland Waterways Maritime Academy - remain aligned with market demands. This alignment will further cement Ohio's position as a leader in the river economy while attracting additional private investment to the region.

Passing HB 469 is not merely an investment in the Ohio River counties; it is an investment in Ohio's future. This legislation will amplify the impact of ongoing revitalization efforts, create high-quality jobs,

and provide the tools necessary to unlock the untapped potential of one of Ohio's greatest natural resources. The benefits will ripple far beyond the river, strengthening our state's economy and positioning us as a hub for innovation and development.

In closing, I urge the Ohio House to pass HB 469 and seize this extraordinary opportunity to bolster economic and workforce development, and secure a prosperous future for all Ohioans.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I'm happy to answer any questions the committee may have.