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Chairman Peterson, Ranking Member Humphrey and the rest of the Government Oversight Committee, thank you for your time and your willingness to hear feedback on SB 158.

It is unfortunate that we all have to come here today to argue that Cleveland residents have a right to self-government. Nevertheless, I understand that the concept of participatory budgeting is probably a new one to most of you, and that bad faith framing of Cleveland's proposed charter amendment has obscured its purpose and efficacy. I'd like to just take some time to explain why this idea is not only a valuable tool that must be available to local governments, but a pivotal and crucial antidote to the despair and loss of faith in government that is shared by both the residents of Cleveland and many of your own constituents.

Working as a Community Organizer over the last five years, I have spoken to hundreds of people about the issues burdening them and their families. I think that the biggest throughline is a sense of powerlessness. In a globalized economy, the forces that shape all of our lives feel remote and arbitrary. Whether through automation or offshoring, entire sectors of employment are being rapidly whisked away, but education and retraining are inaccessible for most people without incurring tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt. According to a report this month by ATTOM, home prices have become unaffordable for people making the median income in over 99% of the country. And that's for the national median salary of \$71,000, dramatically in excess of what most people make in Cleveland. The situation is not much better for renters, who typically pay up to a third or more of their income on rent alone, and are increasingly being asked to pay that rent to faceless private equity firms and overseas land speculators. Most Americans now live paycheck to paycheck at the mercy of distant conglomerates trying to squeeze them for every cent that they can.

This pervasive sense of powerlessness has many symptoms. You can see it in the vitriol and hostility that has infested our politics, in the way people turn on their friends and families over simple disagreements because they feel like their only meaningful vector of political action is to shame their loved ones. You can see it in the catastrophic mental health crisis afflicting our entire country, but especially our youth, who can envision no future that they want to be a part of. And you can see it most acutely in the undercurrent of addiction and violence in our country, because far too many people have either given up completely or have decided to seize back a sense of control in the most harmful and counterproductive ways imaginable.

Good government is supposed to protect people from these forces. And democracy is supposed to offer a sense of power to every citizen. But many see their relationship to government as a purely extractive one with no upside. In the news, people watch their tax money constantly go to corporate bailouts and to funding wars overseas, while their roads

crumble, their neighborhoods collapse, and their families fall into poverty. Taxes are not connected to services and community upkeep in people's minds because in many communities, those things simply aren't happening. And where they are, they get taken for granted. And so people lose all sense of connection or loyalty to the places they're growing up and to their leadership, fleeing this state in droves because it's not offering them what they need. We have to be bold if we are ever going to turn things around.

Participatory Budgeting is a way of restoring this missing sense of power and community. One need only look at the city where it was first invented: Porto Alegre, Brazil, which was at the time a desperately poor city in a nation emerging from two decades of brutal dictatorship. PB's creators were looking to instill faith in democracy in a place it hadn't existed for a generation. Within a few years of the PB process, participation was up across the board, basic sanitation access jumped 23% and budgets for health care and education increased 27%, with Porto Alegre becoming the birthplace of a global PB movement. Many others today have spoken on its merits as a tool for civic engagement. I am making a more spiritual argument. I support Participatory Budgeting because in my five years as a community organizer, it's basically the only initiative I've ever seen people get excited about. Everything else has been about preventing something horrible from happening or addressing a crucial need or problem that had been allowed to fester for decades. This is for once something new and positive that people can be a part of themselves. The potential is immediately evident to everyone that we speak to about it, and we have spoken to thousands of Cleveland residents.

Even if we had the perfect city government, one that was efficient, responsive, and always centered the needs of its most vulnerable residents, people would still feel powerless and disconnected. Participatory Budgeting is essential for the time of crisis that we live in precisely because it gives people direct agency and control over their own tax dollars. They can experience firsthand the process of advocacy and compromise that each of you participate in as representatives. PB is not designed to displace or contradict our representative government. It has always been intended as an exercise in fostering empathy and cooperation with our civil servants. But people on the ground have different priorities and different perspectives than elected representatives, and a sense of balance has to be restored. 2% is all that we are asking for, and even that amount would not kick in until 2027.

I have no doubt that the process of implementing Cleveland's PB charter amendment will be complicated, and that the first year, with 1%, will be a learning experience. Some parts of the process have been left vague in order to allow flexibility, but it is essential that the steering committee act quickly to implement bylaws that will enforce the same standards of integrity, transparency, and due diligence that elected officials are required to abide by. But I know that the people advocating this charter amendment are deeply sincere in their love for the city, its residents, and for democracy, and will do whatever is necessary to make sure the spirit and intention of this initiative is honored at every step of the process, just as we have all driven down together today.

But SB 158 is not about our amendment, or its relative merits and weaknesses. It is about denying Clevelanders the right to even consider the amendment, and denying all Ohioans the right to explore participatory budgeting as an option in any capacity. I do not fear Participatory Budgeting because it has been well tested, well studied, and most of all, because I have faith in the people. If you do not have faith in the people, how can you expect us to place our faith in you? Please vote no on SB 158. Thank you, and I am happy to answer any questions.

Sincerely,
Evan O'Reilly
People's Budget Cleveland