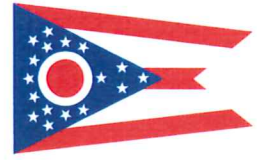




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House Pension Committee

November 14, 2023

Testimony on House Bill 296

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Chair Matthews, Vice-Chair King, Ranking Member Lightbody, and committee members – I am Gary Wolske, President of the Fraternal Order of Police of Ohio. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today in favor of House Bill 296, which provides common-sense reforms to our pension system meant to keep it solvent for another generation.

I'm here as the voice of the 23,000 members of the Fraternal Order of Police – active-duty officers and retirees, and in solidarity with firefighters with whom we share a pension system.

I'm here today to encourage this committee to address one crucial problem – ensuring our pensions are secure and that the promise made to officers is kept. This is, of course, vitally important. Police officers pay into their pension themselves throughout their careers and take for granted that they will receive a return on that retirement investment.

A poll found that ninety-two percent of Ohioans believe it's essential that municipalities keep their promises to fund police and firefighters' pensions adequately. Overwhelmingly, **sixty-two percent** of Ohio residents think it's time for employers to increase their share.

The security of our pension is an important piece of recruitment. A quality pension makes the job more desirable. As departments undergo buyouts and mass retirements, the pension must be unquestionably secure as a recruiting tool to bring in the next generation of men and women who will protect and serve our communities.

The Ohio Chamber of Commerce released a poll in October of 2022 that revealed some surprising data. Seventy-four percent of Ohio adults feel that violent crime is on the rise. Talk to any officer on the street – they'll tell the same story. With this in mind, shouldn't we do more to support our law enforcement, not less? HB 296 is an investment in law enforcement and, by extension, the safety of our communities.

For those who wonder if this is the best solution to shore up law enforcement pensions, let me assure you that we have tried every other road. Already, our

Chairman Adam Mathews

November 14, 2023

Page 2

members have seen their contribution to their pension increase. Officers are currently contributing 12.25%, an increase in 2015 from 10%.

Our members have also seen a fundamental change in how the cost-of-living increase is applied as a cost saver for the pension.

Our retirees saw a massive change to their health care, moving to a stipend model. That process was painful and confusing for our members, but ultimately, it was accepted in the name of stabilization.

Meanwhile, the employer contribution has remained the same since 1986—thirty-seven years without an increase from municipalities.

Everyone must agree that the value of our employer's contributions has shrunk over the last thirty-seven years. A dollar in 1986 is worth forty-two cents today.

HB 296 would responsibly phase in an increase to the employer contribution to 24%, bringing police in line with fire. And it would still be lower than many comparable systems. Louisiana's employer contribution is 38%. Montana's is 43%. Miami, Florida, pays 35%.

Now is the time. The volatility of the markets makes the future of the pension fund uncertain. My members have played ball and suffered from tough decisions to ensure their pension is solvent. The time is now for employers to increase their share.

It's **NOT** an unreasonable ask. We're **NOT** asking them to carry the burden alone. We need municipalities and the legislature to support first responders. HB 296 is good government. It's a responsible solution. My 23,000 members ask for your yes vote.

Thank you.