

Good afternoon Chairman Mathews;

I will be attending tomorrow's hearing at noon. Attached is the testimony I will be presenting:

Chairman Mathews and members of the committee- Thank you for the opportunity to visit Columbus and speak about how vitally important it is for you to take action to adopt House Bill 296- the Police and Fire Pension Modernization Act. I am Andy Gasiewski, president of the Cleveland Police Patrolmen's Association.

I start by thanking you for the work you have done so far, and for the work to come on this vital issue.

Before I get to the heart of the matter-why House Bill 296 is the right legislation at the right time-I want to discuss two things.

First- I understand some opponents, and even some legislators have commented there haven't been as many police officers as they may have thought speaking here on this issue. That is not the case as all our statewide union presidents for police and fire have testified on behalf of their members. In addition, between our extreme shortages and mandated overtime it is difficult for police officers to come here in person. In Cleveland we are experiencing twelve hour shifts due to the personnel shortages. I know several presidents of all of our unions have come, and testified to represent us, and I am here today on behalf of Cleveland police officers.

Second, let's discuss those opponents of this legislation. What is their solution? We want to know the answer. There are three ways to affect pension funding – cut benefits, increase the employees share, or increase the employers share. We've already seen our benefits cut and our employee share increase almost seven percent over the same time period. This legislation would responsibly increase the employer share to make funding for police and firefighters equal over a period of time. It would be the first increase for employers in 40 years. All I've heard over and over again is that municipalities don't want that.

What do they want? Seriously, it's time to solve these issues. Not a single one of them has offered which other solution they're in favor of. They don't want to pay more. They don't deny that OP&F was started with 15% funding, municipalities didn't want to pay from the start and have been given decades to retire their initial debt. Employers don't deny that Ohio's employer burden is less than other large states. So what do they suggest?

My pension is a promise made to me. There are trade-offs to do this job. It's a dangerous job. I'm proud to serve, but I've taken on the risk partly because of the promise of a strong pension on the other side. I'm taking care of my community now on the promise that they'll take care of me in retirement.

The Police and Fire Pension Fund is one of the best-run pensions for first responders in America. We're proud to be members. It's the elite pension fund in Ohio. But it isn't immune to market effects. Its investments have served us well, but in an extended period of uncertainty, we have to be responsible. A small adjustment in anticipated return makes a tidal wave of an impact 30 years down the line.

So did the OP&F come to you in crisis?

NO.

They came to you in 2021 before funding became a crisis. Let's solve this in a responsible, measured way. That's not just good pension policy, it's good government.

It's time to act.

It's time to say fairness requires the employer share paid for police and for fire be equal.

It's time to say a small group of well-connected municipal lobbyists don't get to drown out the voices of tens of thousands of first responders and millions of Ohioans who think this state should keep its promise to us.

Please Pass HB 296 out of committee. Take it to the floor. Vote yes and send it to the Senate so they can do the same. We hear about a lot of controversy out of Columbus these days. This isn't controversial. It's a slam dunk to help keep our pension stable. It's a slam dunk for first responders. It's a slam dunk for the members of the Cleveland Police Patrolmen's Association.

In closing, thirty some odd years ago when I got out the Navy and returned to Ohio with the dream to be a Cleveland police officer, I worked in the steel mills. I experienced the pension scare in the mills. Please do not allow first responders, including myself, to experience a scare like that again.

Thank you.