



Ohio House Ways and Means Committee
House Bill 1 – Opposition Testimony

Jonathan Harris, Director
Portage County District Library

Chairman Roemer, Vice Chair Merrin, Ranking Member Troy and members of the House Ways and Means Committee, I thank you for the opportunity to voice my concerns, and those of the Portage County District Library Board of Trustees regarding House Bill 1.

Portage County District Library (PCDL) serves over 100,000 Ohioans in Portage County, with the exception of those living within the Kent and Ravenna City School Districts, which have their own respective libraries. Our system covers nine different school districts, spanning two cities, four villages, and 18 townships. Until the passage of our local property tax levy in November, 2021, PCDL was the largest library system solely reliant on the Public Library Fund (PLF) for revenue. In terms of per-capita revenue, the system ranked 249 out of 251 libraries across the entire state. Our one mill, ten-year levy was approved by voters after 12 attempts in the past 50 years. The levy now accounts for roughly half of our library’s funding, with the other half coming from the PLF. At the time of writing, HB 1 has the potential to negatively impact both of those funding sources.

Impacts to State Funding

In terms of PLF funding, any reduction to state revenue has a direct impact on the PLF. Our 1.7 percent of the General Revenue Fund (GRF) means that Ohio’s libraries have a vested interest in the economic wellbeing of the state. We take that commitment seriously, and the services we offer, whether it be early literacy initiatives, job training programs, and public internet access, all work to contribute to the prosperity of the communities we serve and the state as a whole. While I do not have a crystal ball to predict the exact outcomes of how changes to the state income tax structure would impact our library, any change that results in a reduction to GRF revenue will likewise reduce our ability to provide those valuable services.

Impacts to Local Funding

When it comes to our property tax funding, the proposed change in property assessment rates would have a profound impact on our recently passed levy. When we made our case to voters in 2021, we were intentional about what we were asking for. We did not ask for more than we needed, and we tied that revenue to real-world services we could offer. With the levy’s passage, our library was able to restore hours, so that we can be open six days a week at each of our five branches.



Our library has also made a commitment to open a new location, and we are working with Brimfield Township on finalizing plans for that branch. We look forward to inviting Representative Demetriou out for the ribbon-cutting when it opens later this year. Another commitment made on the campaign trail was to restore bookmobile service to areas of Portage County not currently served by one of our library branches. Unfortunately, supply chain issues have delayed construction of our new bookmobile, and we hope to begin this service in early 2024.

These are the promises we made to voters, and we are in the business of keeping those promises. We have already kept the first of those promises in the expansion of hours, and will soon be able to keep another with the opening of a new branch. We look forward to delivering in full with the return of bookmobile service. We believe that our constituents understood what they were voting for when our measure was passed, and the crucial role that they would play in helping us achieve those goals. A reduction in assessment rates would drive down the revenue generated by our levy, and would jeopardize our ability to deliver on our promises to the communities we serve. Likewise, a reduction in our revenue from the PLF threatens our ability not just to provide services, but to make repairs and updates to aging buildings, equipment, and infrastructure.

I am, at heart, just a humble librarian, and I will be the first to admit that I do not have a silver bullet answer for our tax code. However, like librarians all across our state, I am deeply committed to the communities I serve, and to helping them grow, thrive, and prosper. If you want to build a better future, you need to start with a firm foundation. As you consider this bill, that foundation is what we are asking you to protect.

Sincerely,

Jonathan Harris, Director
Portage County District Library