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Joint Committee on Property Tax Review and Reform Ohio Fire Chiefs' Association Testimony Wednesday, May 22, 2024

Good morning, Co-Chair Roemer, Co-Chair Blessing, and members of the Property Tax Review and Reform Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the 1,855 members of the Ohio Fire Chiefs' Association. My name is Steve Kelly and I am the Township Administrator and Public Safety Director for Miami Township in Clermont County. I serve as the Chair of the OFCA's Policy Committee and am a 28-year veteran of the fire service who recently transitioned into my current role as the Township Administrator. My new position has afforded me a whole new perspective on local government, especially as it pertains to the ability to provide a multitude of services while balancing the associated costs to our residents.

I would like to start by acknowledging that I currently work in a home rule township form of government, and have for the majority of my career in public service. While I cannot expressly speak to the issues that might present themselves to other municipalities, the general tenets will be the same.

The very first thing I remember about starting into my career in public service was an overwhelming desire to serve others. Although it is perhaps a cliched reason to serve, I believe you would find that same sentiment in the majority of folks you would ask about their reasoning behind selecting a public-facing job. I would venture to say most, if not all of you share that same feeling and belief. It is for that reason that we continuously try to find ways to innovate and deliver cost-efficient and effective services to the areas we serve, the residents who call our towns "home", and businesses that choose to open in our communities.

As you know townships rely heavily on the passage of property levies to fund their operations and services. Some cities do as well, but they also have the added benefit of realizing the ability to collect income taxes. These are the funds that are the life-blood for us to maintain and improve our local infrastructure, staff various positions that interact with the public daily to maintain their quality of life, and provide vital protective services through 9-1-1 telecommunicators, law enforcement, and fire and EMS employees.

Knowing that our residents are already burdened by increasing property values across the state, all local service agencies are working hard to find ways to maintain the existing levels of service that our residents and businesses have come to expect. Many communities are find it increasingly difficult to deal with the increases in costs to provide these services amidst rising inflation and the cost of goods and services that we all need to perform our jobs effectively. The cost for vehicles in our fleets continue to soar, if you can even get them. The cost for medications for our ambulances continue to soar, if you can even get them, and employees have the ability to select from multiple employers in the public and private sectors, which adds to the overall difficulty of recruiting, training, and retaining a limited workforce. When the economy is doing well, many people do not look to the public sector for employment since a job in the private sector can be much more lucrative, if even for a shorter term.

The problem many of us in public services are facing is the competition that currently exists for tax dollars. You have already heard from the Ohio Township Association who gave you a figure that “townships only levy approximately 6% of the total property taxes in Ohio.” (OTA Testimony, May 2024). The fact is that we do not have the luxury of making more widgets to increase revenues, nor can we continually request our residents to pass new tax levies that will increase their property taxes and take more money out of their pockets. They are already being asked to do so much, all we are asking for is your consideration as you review and discuss any potential property tax reforms.

The members of the Ohio Fire Chiefs’ Association did not send me here to plead poverty to you, or to paint a picture of doom and gloom. They sent me here with a message to not forget about them. As you are working to figure out how to improve the collection and use of property taxes, think of:

- The parks and recreation employees within your own communities that are showing up on a daily basis to make sure your parks are clean and ready for your kids to play the sports they love or hang out on the playground when school lets out for the summer.
- The service department employees that are installing drainage to move water

around our communities effectively to ward off storm related runoff and public health issues, and then also repaving the streets that you are driving on every day.

- The 9-1-1 telecommunicators who answer the phone day and night when anyone has a question, issue, or emergency that requires immediate attention.
- The police officers who patrol the community to keep your families safe and crime rates low to help maintain the property values and overall health of a community.
- The fire and EMS responders who train daily and show up for any emergency, no matter how large or small, to try to make a bad day a little better for those who are hurt, sick, or just scared sometimes.

We know you have a lot to consider regarding this matter and do not wish to burden you further with an outstretched hand or unreasonable expectations, but when we look at the current tax abatements that exist to attract and retain businesses to Ohio and our local communities, we cannot help but feel the sting when we realize that they may not have to pay anything for the same level of services that our residents rely on despite the fact that these businesses can make more widgets or provide more services that can improve their profit margins.

Despite the ability to grant tax abatements, no one can abate the impact to the local service providers because those services cannot stop. We are often being asked to do more with less these days, to stretch our tax dollars further, and stave off asking for replacement or renewal tax levies. All of this is happening while facing increasing costs to provide these vital services to our communities. I appreciate your willingness to hear my testimony today and to consider reasonable measures that will assist those of us who provide public services, while protecting the residents that we serve.

Thank you once again Co-Chair Roemer, Co-Chair Blessing and members of the Property Tax Review and Reform Committee for the opportunity to stand before you today to represent the Ohio Fire Chiefs' Association and Public Service professionals across the State of Ohio. I will be glad to answer any questions at this time.