

**TESTIMONY TO THE
SENATE AGRICULTURE & NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE
SENATOR TIM SCHAFFER, CHAIR
APRIL 25, 2023**

Chair Schaffer and members of the Agriculture & Natural Resources Committee of the Ohio Senate, good morning. I am Philip C. Richter, Executive Director of the Ohio Elections Commission, and am giving testimony on behalf of the Commission regarding the Commission's budget for the next biennium. Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to address the subcommittee on behalf of the Commission.

Since the Ohio Elections Commission commenced operations as an independent state agency on January 1, 1996, over 22,000 cases have been filed with the Commission. In addition, the Commission has issued 79 advisory opinions.

Since the previous budget was approved and as a result of the financial ramification of the pandemic, the Commission has carried out its mission with only 1 very capable administrative assistant to serve as additional staff along with me as Executive Director. Along with the 7 Commission members, comprised of three (3) Democrats, three (3) Republicans and one (1) independent, the now nine (9) persons on the Commission's payroll consume over 80% of the Commission's total budget. Although small, the staff of the Commission has been able to efficiently and effectively handle the array of cases filed with the Commission on a consistent basis. The Commission's caseload has been fairly consistent since the Commission became an independent agency, aside from losing jurisdiction over Ohio's false statement statutes a number of years ago. The Commission has continued to have a steady caseload of campaign finance related cases submitted to us from the 88 County Boards of Elections as well as from the office of the Secretary of State, in addition to the complaints filed with us by individuals from across the state.

As with the Commission staff, the operational needs of the Commission continue to be fairly consistent as well, increasing only because of rising prices, such as higher postage costs, increased health insurance premiums and charges imposed on agencies like the Commission from DAS, which are all beyond the control of Commission personnel. My staff and I have worked diligently to limit the Commission's expenditure levels. While the Commission has consistently met its obligations with fewer and fewer dollars, this budget amount includes a very limited increase, though less than I initially requested from the Office of Budget and Management. This budget will simply allow the Commission to continue to maintain its basic operations, now with one fewer employee than the Commission maintained through the first 25 years of its independent operations. It does continue the realistic reliance on the Elections Commission Fund, based on the historic level of receipts to that fund. After essentially receiving consistent cuts to its budget starting in the mid-2000s, I believe that this recommended amount will allow the Commission to effectively operate but it does not allow for the Commission to replace the part-time employee lost at the beginning of the pandemic. My initial request anticipated the re-hiring of that part-time employee, but, again, at this budget level I do not believe that will be possible.

There have been a variety of factors that have allowed the Commission to live within its means during recent budget cycles, and I am certain that this biennium will be no different. Off and on the Commission has experienced periods where it operated with less than a full contingent of members which has saved the operational budget \$4,000 in 2019, \$4,000 in 2017, \$16,000 in 2016, \$30,000 in 2013, \$4100 in 2012, \$18,000 in 2011, \$12,500 in 2010, \$14,500 in 2009 and \$12,500 in 2008. Moving into the Riffe Center in 2015 has saved approximately \$20,000 per year in the Commission's budget from its previous location in the Wyandotte

Building. I believe that I, and my staff, have been very responsible with the funds provided to the Commission to carry out the functions of the Commission, sometimes even to my personal detriment.

I believe that this budget recommendation continues to represent the frugal manner in which this Commission has conducted its operations since becoming an independent agency and continues to reflect the economical way the Commission will maintain its operations through this biennium. Through difficult budget times, I believe that the Commission has continued to move cases through its processes and continues to perform its basic functions in an efficient and effective manner.

On behalf of the seven members of the Elections Commission, I again want to thank you for the opportunity to address this honorable subcommittee. I will do my best to answer any additional questions that you may have regarding the Commission, its current budget, this budget request, as well as our overall operations.

Thank you very much.