

Thank you to the Senate Finance Committee for allowing us to come here today in support of approving a budget increase that would impact the ODNR and specifically, the Muskingum River Parkway.

My name is Captain Heather Sands, and I am here today representing the Valley Gem Sternwheeler. For those who may not know, the Valley Gem is United States Coast Guard inspected passenger vessel carrying 290 passengers and is one of the top ten tourist attractions in the State of Ohio. We are now in our fiftieth year of operation. The Valley Gem that runs today was built in 1988 and 1989 and was specifically designed to run the lock and dam system on the Muskingum River. That means, we can't be too tall or we don't fit under bridges and we can't be too wide or we won't fit in the lock chambers. We are the only passenger vessel that is currently running in this lock system.

Because of how special this lock and dam system is, we build a large part of our season around it. We currently run nine months of the year and we travel through at least one of the Muskingum River locks in seven of those months, multiple times. Historically, we have traveled all the way to Zanesville and have also taken multiple trips to Stockport, Beverly and Lowell and take numerous tours through Devola each year.

The Muskingum River is a very unique river. The history here is rich and full and featured prominently in the movement westward after the Revolutionary War. This river brought life and transportation and natural resources to build a new life. The Muskingum River boasts one of the most famous female pilots in Jane McMillan who's claim to fame beside being a female pilot, was also one of the only pilots to run the river at night. Even today running the river at night is very difficult. After the lock and dam system was complete, Zanesville, became the cultural hub of the entire country. These are the types of events in our history that we must remember and teach and by being able to take passengers through this lock system, we can take them back in time and let them feel what it was like over 180 years ago when it was unthinkable to be able to travel to Zanesville in a day.

The Muskingum River Parkway is vital to the preservation of, not only an incredible feat of engineering, but also a fantastic piece of history. To my knowledge, the Muskingum River is home to the only complete system of hand-operated locks remaining in the United States. Think about how amazing it is to be able to say that our state has this incredible lock system on this beautiful river and we have been mindful enough and have understood its importance in history enough to keep it in such great condition. It has remained in great condition for over 180 years because it is maintained and used and cared for with thoughtfulness and diligence.

While pieces have been repaired and replaced, the locks function just as they did at their completion in 1841. Unfortunately, that care and thoughtfulness does not come without a cost. Something that unique is difficult to maintain. We have been witnesses over the last 50 years of the tremendous efforts made to keep the river navigable and

the past preserved for future generations to experience. We have been fortunate to partner with the Muskingum River Parkway for many years and have seen first hand how hard maintenance can be and how much the staff cares about their cause. As we have all seen over the course of the last three years, everything costs more. Wages have increased. Workers are hard to find. Virtually every business has a story of struggle since covid. As a tourist attraction, we struggled and we persevered. The Muskingum River Parkway also persevered and now they need help to continue maintaining this amazing hand operated lock system so that it will never be lost to history. Don't let it become a place to drive to and look at instead of experiencing it first hand, inside a lock chamber, being transported back in time. Don't let it become something we have to say "I remember when.." instead of let's go take a ride and experience it yourself.

An increase in funding for the ODNR and in turn the Muskingum River Parkway will help to insure that this piece of our country's history remains active and working and bringing people to our state to experience. For us personally, people travel from all over to see what the lock and dam system is actually like. Many come year after year. There would be a tremendous disappointment within the traveling public if these locks fall into disrepair. I respectfully ask the committee to consider an increase in funding so that generations to come can continue to marvel at this river and all that it offers instead of just remembering when...