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ODNR OPERATING BUDGET HOUSE BILL 33

TESTIMONY

Adam Shriver, Morgan County Commissioner

As a Morgan County Commissioner, serving my 3rd term, I am submitting my testimony regarding House Bill 33 and the ODNR Operating Budget. It is my understanding that the Amended Substitute House Bill 33, passed by the House, cuts requested funding for the Ohio Department of Natural Resources by \$55 million over the two-year budget cycle, leaving the agency with flat funding. On behalf of the citizens, local businesses, school district, and local organizations of Morgan County I urge you to restore funding levels to the amount requested for the operation, staffing, and maintenance of Jesse Owens State Park.

I am a lifelong resident of Morgan County where I have been raising my family and serving my community. Having lived in Appalachia my entire life, I have seen our community face many obstacles, with poverty being at the forefront. According to the Ohio Association of Community Action Agencies 2022 poverty report, out of Morgan County's population of 14,362 people, 6,238 are 200% below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). That is a county population percentage of 43.4%. We currently have a high unemployment rate of 6.2%.

To combat the poverty level and high unemployment rate, we have been working to improve our county's infrastructure which include access to broadband and public water. Our rural location and proximity to major highway systems have been limiting factors for traditional economic development. During my tenure as County Commissioner and as a founding member of the Convention and Visitor's Bureau, tourism has become a potentially sustainable economic development model. According to a 2021 study completed by Tourism Economics, Morgan County receives \$22.2 million in total sales through tourism, which accounts for 173 jobs within the county, \$2.6 million in total income, and \$2.6 in total tax revenue. A recently completed tourism strategic plan, resulted in a focus on outdoor tourism for the county.

We are extremely lucky to have 3 Ohio State parks, and 2 wildlife areas within Morgan County. Burr Oak State Park and Lodge is our largest bed tax contributor due to its continued success. The Muskingum River Parkway State Park brings river traffic to our county. Wolf Creek Wildlife Area continues to attract hunters and anglers, and offers an archery range and shooting range. The newly formed Jesse Owens State Park and Appalachian

Hills Wildlife Area account for most visitors to our area as hunters, anglers, campers, and watercraft enthusiasts have been pouring in.

Without our parks, Morgan County would suffer an insurmountable loss of tourism dollars that is needed to support our local economy. Jesse Owens State Park combined with Appalachian Hills Wildlife Area has created the largest contiguous public land area in our great state, with over 58,000 acres, spread out over Morgan, Noble, Muskingum, and Guernsey counties.

Morgan County has supported the ODNR purchase of what was AEP ReCreation Land and is now Jesse Owens State Park and Appalachian Hills Wildlife Area. We are looking forward to and support the upcoming improvements to the property, which will boost visitation to Morgan County and add tourism dollars to not only the local economy, but also surrounding communities within the Appalachian region. In 2020 and 2021 the total economic impact of Jesse Owens State Park was \$6,528,397. The intended improvements by ODNR will encourage visitation to the region, bringing in much needed tourism dollars that will bolster our local economy.

The project, to break ground this year, includes 10 cabins, 50+ full-service campsites, a retail camp store, and a new state-of-the-art visitor center. Sustainable funding is needed to operate and maintain these sites safely. Funding will be used to add staff, including a naturalist, increase law enforcement which is immensely needed, and for maintenance and operations. Without the requested funding, the project could be in jeopardy or at the very least scaled back. This would be devastating to our community which is mostly comprised of small locally owned businesses. These businesses rely upon the outside dollar's visitors bring to our area for survival. As you know the pandemic took its toll on small businesses. Most of our local businesses were able to endure the financial toll during the last few years because of our local parks and the influx of guests coming to the parks in our county from urban areas as a way of escaping the seclusion everyone felt during this time.

Jesse Owens State Park has been a destination for many over the years and supported education through events such as *Soil and Water Field Day*, *Fishing 101*, local school programs, and *Hooked on Fishing, Not on Drugs*.

Jesse Owens State Park is an integral part of our community. I urge you to support the additional requested funding for our parks. You will be supporting small businesses, youth, education, health and well-being, while protecting our natural resources for not only this generation, but future generations as well.

Adam Shriver