

**TESTIMONY ON ODNR OPERATING BUDGET**

**HOUSE BILL 33**

My name is Jon Dobney and I would like to offer testimony on House Bill 33.

Most of my comments will involve Ohio State Parks. I worked there for 37 years and retired in 2014. I held many jobs while employed there and spent 11 years in the Office of the Chief as Assistant Chief. I am currently the Director for Greene County Parks and Trails and have held this position for 5 years.

Ohio State Parks is the most visible agency within ODNR and has a long history of service not only to all Ohioans, but visitors from all over the nation. It was the first state park system in America to win the Gold Medal for Excellence, given by the American Academy for Parks and Recreation Administration in partnership with the National Recreation and Parks Association. The reputation of Ohio State Parks was built on outstanding customer service and this has continued due to the investment that has been made in the organizations staff. The staff oversees the operation of 10,000 campsites, 500 cabins, administers contracts on 10 lodges and 5 golf courses. These operations contribute the vast majority of the dollars generated internally and require a continuing investment in staffing to make it possible. The rest of the budget, with the exception of some smaller fund amounts, comes from GRF.

In looking at HB 33, ODNR was flat funded. Many operational line items were reduced and some were eliminated. Most concerning to me, and the millions of state park users, is the reduction of \$16 million each fiscal year in the budget of Ohio State Parks. These cuts would have a very detrimental effect on the staffing levels in parks. Of particular concern is a reduction in Law Enforcement Officers in both FY24 and FY 25. In 2001 there were 271 commissioned officers, now there are 145. The demands on these officers is tremendous and a plan to bolster the numbers was in

place. The budget cut would eliminate this. The millions of visitors, both overnight and day use, count on the officers to maintain a safe environment for them to enjoy the time they spend in parks or on the lakes. It would also effect the ability to hire new staff or replace retiring staff. Several new areas are set to open (Great Council State Park in Greene County and Jesse Owens State Park in Morgan County) and staffing is critical for opening and maintaining these areas. The general increase in the cost of supplies is also eroding the budget as the cost of doing business continues to rise.

Some other items of note:

-The Special Projects line for Indian Lake vegetation management was removed. This will have a tremendous economic impact on the area as the lake is a driving revenue generator for the local community.

-Buckeye State Tree Nursery funding is eliminated. This move would drive up the cost of root stock because of the need to purchase seedlings.

-Eliminating Project Wild Environmental education.

-Eliminates critical funding for hiring staff in the Division of Natural Areas and Preserves. 10 permanent positions would be left unfilled. These positions include preserve operation managers and natural resource technicians, both of which are critical to the Division to meet its mission. These positions, as well as Project Wild, are instrumental in the education aspects of ODNR.

Thank you.