

Subject: Testimony before the Senate Agriculture Committee as an Interested Party to HB33, 135th General Assembly

By: Martin McAllister, speaking on behalf of The Friends of Scioto Brush Creek, Inc.

720 State Route 772, Rarden, OH 45671

740-637-4682

Chairman Schaffer, Vice Chair Landis and Ranking Member Paula Hicks-Hudson and other members of the Committee:

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify on HB 33. My name is Martin McAllister. I have served the people of Ohio for over 40 years in the field of conservation. I have been retired from public service for nearly a decade, after having served the Department of Natural Resources for 27 years. I am currently employed by The Nature Conservancy, who I understand will be submitting separate comments. But today I come to you as a representative of The Friends of Scioto Brush Creek, Inc., a 501c3 non-profit organization whose mission is to maintain and improve the water quality of Scioto Brush Creek through education, awareness and involvement of local residents.

Out of respect for the Committee's time, I will keep my comments brief and to the point, specifically to General Revenue Funding for the ODNR, Division of Natural Areas and Preserves. This is the agency charged with managing Ohio's state-wide system of public state nature preserves and state scenic rivers. These natural areas represent the most significant and most important remnants of Ohio's original landscapes.

It is my understanding that Governor DeWine proposed \$4.5 million (\$4,567,602) in GRF funding for this Division. However, in HB 33 the House reduced the amount to \$3.8 million (\$3,800,000). I am here to respectfully request that this Committee consider the restoration of the funding originally proposed by the Governor. This request is not based on a simple restoration of proposed funds. I am quite confident that government agencies rarely welcome budget reductions, regardless of the circumstances. Rather, my request is based solely on the concept of return-on-investment.

As Ohio prepares for the largest single private-sector investment in our state's history (the \$20 billion Intel Processor factories in Licking County) Ohio will be faced with the challenge of recruiting thousands of workers to not only build these factories, but to staff them once they are completed. In fact, Intel announced last year that it would invest \$100 million toward partnerships with educational institutions. Intel recognizes the importance of attracting and holding a skilled workforce. And just last week Google announced it will build two new data centers in central Ohio bringing its Ohio investments to over \$2 billion. Quality-of-life aspects are very high on the list of things desired by people as they consider relocating for employment. If Ohio is to be successful in recruiting the workforce necessary for these large investments in modern manufacturing and technology, it will be because we thought more deeply than just about the roads and utilities needed to serve the site.

Out of 50 states, Ohio ranks 44th in the amount of public land for preserves, parks, forests and wildlife areas. Only 4.2% of Ohio land is public. This is despite being the seventh most populous state in the

nation. More people than ever are seeking quality outdoor experiences. Post-pandemic statistics show hiking alone has increased over 100%. Recruiting new workers to Ohio, and retaining them once they are trained, will depend partly on making sure those quality-of-life desires are met. According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, in the United States in 2021, the outdoor recreation economy equated to 454 billion dollars of the gross domestic product. A recent report by the Ohio State University on the Economic Valuation of Natural Areas in Ohio finds that those recreating in the outdoors spend \$5.9 billion in Ohio *each year*.

The numbers are very clear on this issue. This is not the time to dial back Ohio's investment in public lands. Especially not our high-quality natural areas and scenic rivers that not only protect our *rarest, most fragile natural features*, but which also welcome public visitation.

I want to close with a short story. In 1997 I was elected president of the Adams County Chamber of Commerce - a tiny office staffed with a couple of volunteers. My first action was to examine the call log and requests for services coming into the office. I learned that 90% of the requests coming into the office were directly related to tourism and outdoor recreation, yet the County had no office equipped to focus on that. The Chamber then launched an effort to establish a non-profit Travel and Visitor's Bureau focused on serving those who wanted to visit the county's extraordinary natural areas, both public and private. Since that time, tourism has become one of the top four employers in the County and generated over \$20 million in wages and \$7 million in taxes in *2021 alone*. Investment at the state level in Ohio Natural Areas and Preserves is not only good for the environment, but also for the economy. I urge the Committee to restore the \$767,000 to the General Revenue budget of the Division of Natural Areas and Preserves, as originally proposed by Governor DeWine.

I thank the Committee for your time and your service.

Martin McAllister