

**Testimony before the Ohio Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee  
in support of S.B. 286 to Create the Ohio River Commission of Ohio**

**Taylor G. Abbott, Monroe County Treasurer**

**Tuesday, November 12, 2024**

Good afternoon, Chairman Schaffer and members of the Ohio Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee.

My name is Taylor Abbott, I'm the Treasurer of Monroe County, Ohio. My family and I have lived and worked along the Ohio River in Monroe County for over 200 years as captains, boat builders, and chief engineers. The Ohio River is not just a part of our history but also an essential asset for our county and our state – which is why I'm here today to express my support for the creation of the Ohio River Commission on behalf of the many port authorities, river industry businesses, local governments, and allied organizations who stand ready and committed to see the creation of this commission.

Without question, the Ohio River Commission represents a critical step toward coordinated leadership, long-term investment, and strategic development along the Ohio River. For these stakeholders, the Ohio River is far more than a waterway; it is an economic artery that sustains industries, fuels job creation, and drives regional growth. The Commission will provide the structure needed to amplify our collective efforts, attract substantial public and private investments, and ensure that the river's full potential is realized for generations to come and emphasize the importance of this initiative for the Appalachian region.

The Ohio River has long served as an economic engine, and I have seen firsthand how it impacts businesses, counties, and individuals in profound ways. However, the Ohio Department of Development projects that 62% of the counties bordering the Ohio River will lose 20%-30% of their populations over the next 25 years. This demographic shift threatens economic stability and regional growth. The river is a critical waterway for commerce, and its strategic value to Ohio, and in fact, the entire nation, cannot be overstated. The creation of this commission will

elevate the economic, transportation, and tourism potential of the Ohio River and its surrounding areas, supporting much-needed growth and development throughout Appalachia.

### **Economic Development and Redevelopment Initiatives**

Efforts to redevelop commercial and industrial sites along the Ohio River are creating new opportunities for manufacturing, technology development, and job creation. The Ohio Department of Development's Brownfield Program has provided crucial support in cleaning up and preparing these sites for future use. We've seen the success of these efforts at sites like the Long Ridge Energy site in Monroe County. At other sites along the Ohio River such as the AMP-Ohio property in Washington County and the Dilles Bottom site in Belmont County millions are being invested to revitalize them into hubs of economic activity. By transforming these areas, we are opening doors to new investments, job opportunities, and regional economic strength.

ODOT's upcoming Ohio Maritime Plan will reveal the significant, yet often overlooked, impact of the Ohio River on the state's economy and transportation network. This plan will highlight how the Ohio River's potential is largely underutilized and its benefits underappreciated, especially compared to other waterways in the state. Historically, funding from ODOT's Maritime Assistance Program (MAP) has primarily supported Lake Erie projects, with only a small portion allocated to Ohio River-based businesses. The insights from this plan will serve as a critical guide for the Ohio River Commission, helping to direct resources and develop policies that ensure balanced investment, greater recognition of the Ohio River's strategic importance, and expanded support for economic growth along this vital waterway.

### **Education and Workforce Development**

Our commitment to educating and training a skilled workforce is essential to sustaining and growing Ohio's economy. The recently announced Inland Waterways Maritime Academy in Sardis, Ohio, for which I am leading the development, is a prime example of this. Developed through a partnership with the Sons and Daughters of Pioneer Rivermen and Mountwest

College of Huntington, West Virginia, this academy will be the first river maritime academy in Ohio and the first institution of higher education in Monroe County.

This academy, aligned with the Ohio River Commission's mission, creates a valuable synergy that will have a lasting impact on workforce development not only in Southeast Ohio where developments like this are opening new doors but also in Appalachia. The Commission's efforts to promote Ohio River infrastructure and transportation complement the academy's objectives, supporting the development of a skilled workforce for the maritime and logistics industries. Together, they will enhance our ability to meet the industry's demands, attract further investments, and enable graduates to thrive in careers on and along the river. This partnership will bring direct benefits not only to Ohio, but to West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Kentucky, underscoring the Ohio River's role in advancing our region's future.

### **Tourism and Community Impact**

The economic impact of tourism along the Ohio River cannot be overstated. The Appalachian Community Grant Program, which recently allocated over \$152 million through the Ironton-Lawrence Community Action Organization, will benefit over 21 projects in counties and communities along or near the Ohio River. These projects, designed to attract visitors and enhance local attractions, will invigorate local economies across the region.

In Marietta and Cincinnati, the influx of riverboats and tourists during the summer months brings significant revenue and vitality to both cities. This surge of visitors, along with the thousands who travel to these cities and other riverfront towns each year, highlights the Ohio River as not only a vital waterway but a true lifeline for local tourism, economy, and cultural heritage.

### **Regional Impact and Statewide Benefits**

The Ohio River corridor, stretching from Pittsburgh to Cincinnati, is a cornerstone of Ohio's economic infrastructure, supporting a commerce network essential to our state's economic strength. As one of the busiest commercial rivers in the United States, the Ohio River facilitates

the movement of over 230 million tons of cargo annually, providing a reliable, cost-effective mode of transport for coal, aggregates, and other key commodities. This commerce contributes billions of dollars to Ohio's economy, creating thousands of jobs across the region and positioning the state as a critical player in Midwest logistics and industry. Establishing the Ohio River Commission will provide Ohio with the unified leadership and strategy required to fully harness the river's potential, drawing new attention and investments that will reinforce our state's standing as an economic leader.

The Ohio River Commission will benefit from the collective support of public and private entities dedicated to preserving and enhancing river operations. Key partners like Central Ohio River Business Association (CORBA) and the American Waterways Operators (AWO) bring extensive expertise in advocating for safer, more efficient, development of waterway transportation and industry. Additionally, organizations such as the Sons and Daughters of Pioneer Rivermen, the Ohio History Connection, and various industry partners will be instrumental in ensuring that this commission maximizes the river's historical, economic, and cultural significance. This collaboration of committed stakeholders will position the Ohio River Commission as one of the strongest river commissions in the nation, enhancing Ohio's commerce, workforce development, and tourism while preserving the river's legacy for future generations.

I urge you to support this legislation to establish the Ohio River Commission. With its powers to develop and promote economic development, oversee marine cargo terminal operations, and enhance tourism along the Ohio River, this commission will be instrumental in realizing a future marked by growth for Ohio and our Appalachian region.

Thank you for your time and consideration.