

## Senate Select Committee on Housing Testimony (12-4-23)

Madam Chair, and members of the Committee, on behalf of the Washington County Board of Commissioners and the citizens of Washington County please allow me to welcome you to Ohio's "First City."

My name is Kevin Ritter, and I am President of our Board of Commissioners. Because my time is limited, I'll get right to it.

I intend to focus my comments today on **four areas** where I believe this committee, and the General Assembly, can make a meaningful impact.

Often, I think we are too narrowly focused on the simple bricks and mortar aspect of the housing question. As a result, we tend to overlook the ancillary factors that hinder development. I'd like to offer, for your consideration, four such roadblocks:

- 1) First, is a **lack of broadband access** and **cell phone coverage** that artificially limit development in our county.

While one hundred percent of Franklin County is covered by high speed internet and cellular coverage, only one in three Washington County residents has access in their home. Additionally, large portions of the county lack basic cell phone service.

Without access to phone and internet, it is unattractive for prospective homeowners to build in outlying areas of our

county. For developers, the additional expense of providing cell and internet service makes development simply cost prohibitive.

- 2) Second, **we lack key infrastructure** necessary for housing expansion. Washington County has thirteen independent water companies to provide water to residents. In many cases, the pipes that deliver water to customers are over 40 years old. One water company has pipes that were put in during the Teddy Roosevelt administration.

Furthermore, these water companies are managed by volunteer boards. They have few if any paid employees, and the monthly bill simply covers the cost of treating and transporting the water. These companies lack the ability to borrow large sums of money to make the investment in new lines.

The outlying areas of Washington County are in a “chicken and egg” situation. Building new homes is unattractive until there is internet, cell phone coverage, and water service. However, until there are additional residents in these areas to help shoulder the costs of these investments, no new infrastructure can be built.

The Governor has said that money is available for water projects, but that does not address the facts on the ground. A zero-interest loan that requires payback is not an option for these water companies. They lack the funds to hire engineers and consultants to design the projects.....and they



lack the grant writers and staff to actively pursue these monies.

In Washington County, we resolved this issue by using our ARPA funds and allocating up to \$50,000 per water company. They could purchase equipment or services and provide the invoice to the county for payment. Every water company took advantage of this program.

I would humbly propose the State of Ohio consider adopting a similar plan statewide. Make a sum of money available to qualified independent or municipal water suppliers.

Those suppliers could contract for services, confident that sending the invoice to Columbus would result in payment. Expanding water infrastructure would immediately help alleviate our housing shortages.

- 3) The third issue inhibiting development is that nearly 40,000 acres of land in Washington County is in the Wayne National Forest, off limits to any development. This is more protected/undevelopable land than in the entire state of Connecticut.

Areas that could be used for housing are regulated instead by a federal government that provides an absurdly paltry sum in return. The federal PILT (or payment in lieu of taxes) is less than a quarter of the value if that land if it was in use.

We'd request the State of Ohio to consider purchasing the land from the federal government and allowing us to begin development. We love our horse trails and hiking trails and hunting areas. Those could be preserved, while at the same time allowing limited development. Freeing up that land would help address our housing shortage.

- 4) The final factor inhibiting the development of housing in this area is that **Washington County is cut in two by the Muskingum River.**

There are currently just four bridges across the river.....two in Marietta, one in Lowell, and one in Beverly. As a result, some residents have to drive many miles out of their way to find a crossing point between their home and their employer.

If the General Assembly funded and constructed a bridge across the Muskingum River (something that has seriously been considered twice before), it would have an immediate impact on housing in our community.

Madam Chair, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. Thank you for your time and for your consideration.