

Chairwoman Reynolds, Vice Chair Johnson, and members of the Senate Select Committee on Housing, my name is James Jewell, and I am the Prairie Township Administrator. I would like to thank the Chair and Committee members for the opportunity to speak regarding Prairie Township's Zoning Department. Prairie Township currently has a population of approximately 18,000 residents and covers nearly 19 square miles. We are located on the west side of Franklin County and became a limited home rule township in 2002.

Prairie Township adopted zoning in 1984. Since that time, the Zoning Department has grown tremendously. In 2008, we started our own Commercial Building Department through the Zoning Department. The businesses in Prairie Township submit their commercial plans to our office, have them reviewed by our Chief Building Official, submit for a zoning permit, and have inspections scheduled without having to go to an external agency. With this model, businesses begin the process within the township and finish the process within the Township, leading to less inconsistencies in the processes.

As a limited home rule Township, Prairie is afforded additional authorities similar to a municipal corporation's home rule authority. From 1984 until 2022, the zoning office consisted of four or fewer employees. The Department processed 606 Variances, 57 Conditional Uses, 35 Appeals, and 84 Rezoning applications. The Prairie Township Zoning Resolution has been amended by the zoning staff and the Zoning Commission 17 times since 1984 to meet the demands of the residents in a proactive manner.

Today the Zoning Department consists of five employees who handle more than just zoning Permits, zoning resolution changes, Board of Zoning Appeals and Zoning Commission requirements. They are responsible for the intake and processing of Commercial Building Plan Review and Permit Applications, processing complaints, and inspections for our very active Nuisance Abatement Program that had 828 nuisance complaints and 440 declared nuisances in 2023. The Zoning Department coordinates our Annual Spring Clean-up and our Fall Shred Event for Township residents. They also process MS-4 Land Disturbance applications and Drainage applications then forward them to the appropriate agencies on behalf of Township property owners. In the last few years, they have spearheaded the Do Not Knock Registry, Transient Vendor Permit process, Annual Commercial Contractor Registration, Trash Resolution Citation process, Exterior Property Maintenance Code for Commercial and MFR-12 (multi-family residential) properties, and the Land Acquisition Application process. These processes have all been put in place for the betterment and benefit of our residents and property owners. They are vetted through our legal team before implementing but are then organized and run entirely by the Zoning Department.

A total of 976 zoning permits were processed between 2018 through 2020. Board of Zoning Appeals hearings were held virtually per the ORC guidelines. Our residents and their needs were met and accommodated.

Our residents have come to respect and appreciate that they can call the Zoning Department to answer their questions. The staff pride themselves on being involved with the residents and guiding them through the various processes they may need. If our zoning were to be done through a larger agency such as the county or the state, our residents would no longer receive the exceptional service that our five employees give them. They would be a very small drop in a very large bucket instead of the guiding force that directs the zoning department. It is our firm belief that Townships can be successfully run with a staff who are dedicated and willing to work for the benefit of their community. We are very proud of our Zoning Department and their continuous efforts to meet the growing needs of our community.

The Township receives a lot of great feedback regarding our Commercial Building and Zoning Department from residents and businesses that operate within our jurisdiction. Lauren Tonti Young, Vice President of Thirty-Four Corporation states, "My experience in obtaining variances for 20 lots our company owns in Prairie Township was a positive one. The staff at Prairie Township was available for discussion and to answer questions, quick in their response, and willing to review and grant variances to their baseline policies considering specific circumstances." RJ Sabatino shares, "It has been a pleasure working with Prairie Township on our 160-acre Mixed-Use Development. Prairie has been responsive and punctual in evaluating and approving our applications." We, at Prairie Township, always appreciate feedback and adjust for better efficiency in our processes. I hope that this committee does not penalize Prairie Township but holds other agencies accountable for their lack of efficiency.

Madam Chair, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you this morning. I would be happy to answer any questions you or the committee members may have.