



**Senate Select Committee on Housing
Interested Party Testimony, Senate Bill 245 (Reynolds, Craig)
Jason Warner, Director of Strategic Engagement, Greater Ohio Policy Center
Tuesday, June 25, 2024**

Chair Reynolds, Vice Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Craig and members of the Senate Select Committee on Housing, thank you for affording me the opportunity to testify on Senate Bill 245, which makes a number of important changes to state housing law.

My name is Jason Warner. I am the Director of Strategic Engagement at the Greater Ohio Policy Center. Greater Ohio is Ohio's leading advocate for urban revitalization and sustainable growth, working to improve the communities of Ohio through smart growth strategies and research.

Last fall, Greater Ohio Policy Center's Executive Director testified before the committee during the investigatory phase of your work. At that time, we spoke of the need for a "silver buckshot" solution – an all-of-the-above approach to preserving and increasing housing options, especially homeownership options in Ohio.

We applaud the Committee for the work that it has done to this point, for the final report you submitted in April, and for following through with concrete legislative proposals that address this issue head-on. At a time when too many blue-ribbon reports simply gather dust on a shelf, we appreciate that the committee is determined to act on the recommendations outlined in its report.

Senate Bill 245 (SB245) is one of those proposals – some of that 'silver buckshot' Greater Ohio spoke about last September. While SB245 addresses a number of issues related to existing state housing law, I want to address a few aspects of the bill which are of high interest to Greater Ohio.

Property Conveyance Transparency

SB245 requires buyers in a transaction that conveys ownership of real property or a manufactured or mobile home to provide information to the county auditor before the auditor indorses the transaction. This information includes affirmation that the buyer is a natural person. In circumstances where a trust, business, or non-profit is buying a home, the bill still requires a natural person or designated agent to be listed.

Having this information disclosed helps address maintenance and code violations if they come up. As we have seen more and more single and multi-family homes transition away from owner-occupied to renter-occupied structures, we have seen an increase in problem properties that are negligent in addressing maintenance issues, falling into ever-troubling states of disrepair, and, crucially, negligent in payment of property taxes.

Having a designated natural person who is responsible for addressing the concerns of these properties will ensure renters have someone they can raise maintenance and other residential

issues with. This provision also provides local governments with a responsible party to hold accountable for code and taxation questions.

Greater Ohio has long-supported the need for these types of disclosure requirements for residential rental property. Having a responsible party who can be held accountable for property maintenance helps ensure homes are well maintained, neighborhoods do not fall victim to blight, and communities are able to remain strong, vibrant places.

Building Inspections

SB245 makes several changes intended to speed-up the building inspection process and ensure more certified building inspectors are available for the growing statewide need for code enforcement inspectors and new construction reviewers. These changes include simplifying the certification process, reducing bureaucratic hurdles, and making certification a more accessible process.

Additionally, SB245 speeds-up the inspection process over residential or nonresidential building construction projects. To accomplish this, in addition to the process of expanding the number of code enforcement officials available, SB245 would enable third-party private inspectors and certified building departments approved by the Board of Building Standards to conduct plan review and inspections for residential and nonresidential construction projects.

Greater Ohio recognizes that these changes are important and will help projects move through the planning and construction process faster and , more efficiently. We also appreciate that third-party reviewers would need to be approved by the Board of Building Standards in order to review plans and inspect construction projects.

Ultimately, in order to ensure compliance with all projects, including code enforcement of existing properties, having a sufficient number of certified building inspectors is the best way to ensure qualify housing remains available and accessible at all price points. The best way to accomplish this is to ensure communities have the resources available to maintain staff to complete this important work. We encourage the committee to consider ways to support local government partners and the important work that is their charge related to code enforcement.

Evictions

Finally, SB245 makes important changes to state law governing tenant evictions. Ohio is seeing high numbers of evictions across the state. The committee has already heard expert testimony that many times, these evictions have little to do with whether or not the individual facing eviction is a “good tenant”. Instead, with growing frequently, eviction cases are occurring based on a range of issues, including tax foreclosure, ownership changes, or just because the landlord wants to remove the property from the rental market.

Tenants facing eviction who are not aware of their legal rights in these circumstances face the possibility of not only being left with nowhere else to live, but the black mark of having a legal and financial record that shows they have been evicted. This impacts an individual’s access to credit, and can lead to difficulty securing new housing due to a legal record showing they are no longer a ‘good tenant’.

SB245 includes provisions providing legal counsel in eviction proceedings for certain low-income tenants, as well as establishing a procedure to seal eviction records. These are important changes that will do much to help 'good tenants' continue to have access to credit and housing.

Like our concerns with ensuring communities have adequate numbers of building inspectors, we are similarly concerned about ensuring that there is enough legal representation available to aid the number of likely low-income tenants who would be qualified for free legal services. We encourage the committee to ensure resources are available to assist legal aid societies and indigent defense funds in meeting the needs of Ohioans facing these legal challenges.

Conclusion

Chair Reynolds and members of the Senate Select Committee on Housing, thank you for the opportunity to share our thoughts on SB245. I appreciate the committee's time and attention and would be happy to address any questions the committee may have.