

Senate Committee on Ways & Means  
Senate Bill 244 – Proponent Testimony

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Chairman Blessing, Vice Chair Roegner, Ranking Member Smith, and members of the Senate Committee on Ways and Means:

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony in support of Senate Bill 244. My name is William C. Merriman, and I care deeply about this issue. I have lived on Church Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio, for well over 50 years, having been a part of a group of community activists that worked for decades, stabilizing housing (including bringing about the rehabilitation of two low-income family apartments, and a 40 unit senior citizen apartment building), the redevelopment of local parks, supporting the schools and churches, and working together on safety issues, even as we raised our children (and then came the grandchildren...) and, surprise, we finally had to face the issues of our own getting old together.

I was speaking with a local developer a couple years ago, who expressed appreciation for the work that so many of our neighbors and non-profit organizations had done to stabilize our part of the Near West Side of Cleveland. He commented, "If you people hadn't done what you did, then, we wouldn't be able to do what we are going to do!" The day of affordable housing for modest-income people has been coming to an end, as investors and new development provide opportunities only for upper-income residents.

There is now a fear that this new development, the escalating property values, and thus the rising real estate taxes, up and down the street, will make it cost-prohibitive to remain in the only neighborhood I have known for most of my adult life,

Senate Bill 244 would help low-income homeowners across Ohio by giving their local governments the authority to limit increases in assessed value by creating Residential Stability Zones.

Like other people who care about housing in Ohio, I understand that it's a complicated issue. From housing supply to property taxes, we need many different solutions to deal with the many ways housing has become unaffordable to too many Ohioans.

I am especially concerned about property taxes and how the process of reassessing property values can displace people – not only long-time homeowners, like me, but also low and modest-income renters, whose rental costs are escalating to the point where it is a challenge to maintain what was once a racially and economically diverse neighborhood community.

**That's why I am submitting testimony in support of one issue in particular: Residential Stability Zones, as presented in Senate Bill 244.** Residential Stability Zones would offer some targeted relief from skyrocketing property taxes to low-income homeowners. Modeling Ohio's existing law on residential tax abatement, Senate Bill 244 would authorize local municipalities to implement a permissive program tailored to their residents, but always within guardrails to focus these programs on long term homeowners who are low-income.

Residential Stability Zones could help many different types of Ohioans. They could help seniors stay in their homes and benefit from new development and investment that happens around them, without having to worry about taxing them out of their homes. It could help families with kids stay in a neighborhood where they've been living for years, keeping those kids in the same schools they're used to and in the same community of support. Residential Stability Zones would ease pressure on developers who want to bring investment into our communities, but often face the fears and worries from longtime residents scared that new development will displace them by increasing property taxes and making their homes suddenly unaffordable.

I also believe that Senate Bill 244, with the provision of Residential Stability Zones, are urgent ideas because I belong to a multi-neighborhood association of seniors, Cleveland Westside Village, which has been working together for years to provide for the needs of local seniors who are committed to one another, so that we can age in place, remaining in the homes and on the streets where we raised our families together.

We have found ways to deal with second floor bedrooms and bathrooms, the need for accompaniment to doctor's offices, installing handrails and ramps, but the threat of being ultimately taxed out of one's home sends a chill down one's spine. As an 80 year-old retired Post Office letter carrier, I find it more and more of a challenge to make ends meet, while remaining in this handicapped-accessible house we built for my now-deceased wife, over 20 years ago, as she encountered the challenges of cancer and, finally, Alzheimer's Disease. I thought that this ADA home would also serve my needs, when I become less mobile. We shall see....

I understand that the General Assembly is considering many other proposals and bills to deal with housing and property taxes. Senate Bill 244 is just one tool, and I understand that it is not a silver bullet. But, if passed into law, it would make a meaningful difference for thousands of Ohioans. And, in combination with existing programs and other bills under consideration, it can be another tool to help preserve homeownership for Ohioans.

Sincerely,

William C. Merriman  
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