

My name is Robert Santos, and I present this statement as the President of the Mahoning County Township Association, representing 14 townships within our jurisdiction, including Austintown, where I serve as Vice-Chair. I am here to express our strong opposition to any funding reallocation of recreational marijuana dispensaries dedicated to the hosting communities.

To provide some context, I dedicated 11 years of my life to the United States Marine Corps, where I was honorably discharged due to injuries sustained while defending our freedoms. My upbringing was challenging; raised by a single mother, Judy Santos, who worked tirelessly to support my siblings and me, I experienced food insecurity firsthand. There were times when my brother and I would sell our baseball cards just to afford meals. The kindness of the shop owner allowed us to reclaim our cards later, an experience that shaped my empathy and commitment to helping others in need.

My desire to serve this nation has always been steadfast. After my military career, I sought new avenues to continue my service. Witnessing government officials living luxuriously while enacting policies that adversely affected hardworking Americans ignited my determination to advocate for those who cannot advocate for themselves. This led me to run for public office, with a mission to uplift my community and improve the quality of life for all Americans such as each of you who currently serve.

This brings me to my opposition to these changes, which fundamentally undermines the voice of the voters. When Issue 2 was presented to the public, the electorate exercised their right to express their preferences. I want to highlight a key excerpt from Issue 2 that every voter considered:

“Provide for taxation of 10 percent on the sale of adult-use cannabis by dispensaries, in addition to usual sales taxes, with all monies collected from this tax to be allocated as follows: 36 percent to the cannabis social equity and jobs fund; 36 percent to the host community cannabis facilities fund; 25 percent to the substance abuse and addiction fund; and 3 percent to the division of cannabis control and tax commission fund.”

Any changes to this effectively disregards this measure and the will of the people. Regardless of personal views on cannabis, the residents have spoken. While I personally opposed Issue 2, as public servants, we have a duty to respect the decisions made by the electorate.

Issue 2 included three critical elements, two of which our township cannot control: the ability for residents to cultivate cannabis safely (up to six plants per individual, with a maximum of twelve per household) and the authority to permit or deny a recreational marijuana dispensary in our community. Austintown, like many areas across Ohio, welcomed dispensaries based on two factors: the residents voted in favor of it, and the anticipated 36% tax revenue that would significantly support essential community projects.

Ohio has 253 cities, 684 villages, and 1,308 townships. Townships represent the "first

form of government" in Ohio, yet they are often the most underfunded and restricted, providing services to over 35% of the state's population while maintaining more than 41,000 miles of road and overseeing over 2,700 cemeteries. Recognizing the strengths of our cities and villages, it is crucial to acknowledge the vital role townships play in driving economic growth.

Township funding primarily relies on property taxes and fixed levies, which often require us to appeal to overburdened residents for additional support to sustain essential services. The impact of inflation has been particularly harsh; as the costs for vital equipment rise, our revenue remains stagnant. This situation forces us to make difficult choices, such as compromising services like leaf pickup or road maintenance. For example, paving a single mile of a two-lane road now costs over \$232,000, compared to \$92,888 in 2000, not including labor costs. Our cost have doubled but our revenue has not.

This financial strain has compel communities to decommission essential facilities, such as satellite parks, due to high maintenance costs. I challenge anyone to envision the discomfort of explaining to a resident why their cherished park is closing due to insufficient funding, knowing that requesting a new levy would only further strain already burdened households. These challenges affect every district, extending beyond townships.

As President of the Mahoning County Township Association, I can attest to the disconnect our legislators often have with the challenges we face here at the local level. We frequently feel overlooked, and changing the funding allocation threatens yet another essential funding source for our communities.

Mahoning County comprises 14 townships, two of which rank among the top 15 largest in Ohio. Austintown, the 12th largest township, serves over 36,000 residents with a budget of approximately \$17 million, managing over 117 miles of roads. Boardman ranks 10th with a population exceeding 40,000 and a budget of \$24 million, overseeing 145 miles of roads. Additionally, we have the busiest highway in the nation running through our back yard.

While achieving significant political goals may seem commendable, neglecting community needs can erode support from constituents. By caring for the "little guy," we can foster a healthier community and a more effective means of achieving our objectives.

Any changes silence the voice of the voters and strips much-needed funding from our communities.

By allowing these communities to have control on these funding sources that were approved by the voter. We can make a community our children are proud of. And our success will trickle into the communities that surround it.

Altering what was passed disregards the hard work undertaken by communities to approve dispensaries. Officials collaborated with zoning officials to identify acceptable locations for prospective business owners, opening our doors to these businesses with the understanding that the resulting funding would help offset township costs.

As elected representatives, we understand that the state has its projects to fund, but what about our community projects? Our nation was founded on the principles of limited government.

This is not the first time townships have faced the loss of vital funding due to a mere pen stroke. The Local Government Fund provided millions to our communities; for example, Boardman received approximately \$1 million annually, while Austintown received around \$500,000. These funds were critical for training and equipping our emergency responders, ensuring the safety of our residents. However, this funding is now controlled and retained by the state.

Consider the racino issue: Austintown was promised \$500,000 annually, but once the project was underway, those funds were retracted and redirected to state needs. This revenue was essential for repairing roads, building infrastructure, and supporting law enforcement. While Penn National has been a commendable business, we must also recognize that such establishments can attract undesirable crowds, necessitating increased police presence. The promised funding was taken away, forcing officials to seek alternative solutions.

The removal of funding for local communities is a blatant power grab, and we have reached our limit. I urge you to reflect on the reasons that led you to pursue political careers just as I have explained why I sought to serve the residents. Remember the constituents you serve, and I implore you to reconsider the portions of this bill that reallocate funding to the state. Restore the promised resources to our community officials and allow us to govern our towns in a manner that our residents can be proud of.

Let us govern our communities as we were elected to do, just as you were elected to ensure that the voice of the people is heard and respected. Thank you for allowing me to speak today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have. These thoughts are echoed within our community. As you can see from the letters attached from The Mahoning County Commissioners, The Mahoning County Township Association, The Fraternal Order OF Police Lodge 126, and Austintown Township Trustees.