

House Development Committee
Interested Party Testimony, House Bill 96 (Stewart)
Jason Warner, Director of Strategic Engagement, Greater Ohio Policy Center
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Chair Hoops, Vice Chair Lorenz, Ranking Member Abdullahi and members of the House Development Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present Interested Party Testimony on House Bill 96, the main operating budget for fiscal years 2026 and 2027.

My name is Jason Warner. I am the Director of Strategic Engagement at the Greater Ohio Policy Center. GOPC advocates for policies that revitalize Ohio. I appreciate the opportunity to share with you today our thoughts on the main operating budget.

In particular, I want to focus my comments on two programs that support economic development and could have an incredible return on investment for the state of Ohio.

Invest in Ohio's Legacy Communities for Continued Statewide Prosperity

Ohio has the 7th largest GDP in the nation, and all communities across the state contribute to this strong position. However, the [Ohio Department of Development's population projections](#) anticipate Ohio will lose nearly 6% of its population by 2050, with most of the state's legacy cities and surrounding metros expected to experience declining population numbers.

Last month, [GOPC published a white paper](#) that concluded that 59% of Ohio's GDP production comes from counties that are expected to decline in population.

If Ohio wishes to maintain its position as a major GDP producer, Ohio must continue to invest in its legacy communities.

It is for these reasons that GOPC strongly believes Ohio needs to have a permanent brownfield grant program that has its own source of dedicated and predictable funding and programmatic rules that award grants based on a project's merit.

#1: Unlock Acres of Prime Land for Redevelopment Opportunity.

Ohio has hundreds of underused and blighted industrial and commercial sites with utility infrastructure, transportation access, and nearby workers, that are currently unusable. Environmental contamination from previous use is the only barrier to their future use.

In the last four years, Ohio has invested \$700 million to assess and clean-up a portion of these brownfield sites. These funds have leveraged millions of additional private and public dollars, with clean-up work underway in 86 of Ohio's 88 counties. GOPC is proud to have championed

this investment, working with policymakers to reactivate land that will house new businesses, homes, and recreation spaces. However, thousands of brownfields still exist across Ohio.

To date, 631 projects have received grants across the state. Of those projects, 380 are clean-up projects, meaning that the important work of revitalizing those sites is already underway. Once completed, they will be able to proceed with redevelopment projects or be able to be marketed for new development opportunities.

This also means that the 251 sites that have received assessment grants – which only helps to determine the scope of the contamination on site and help set the best course for clean-up-- will still need dollars to aide in their revitalization in order to be suitable for redevelopment.

Ask to the Legislature: Dedicated Funding and Programmatic Adjustments

A source of dedicated funding for the Brownfield Remediation Program (BRP) could help to provide stability to the program and provide communities throughout Ohio with the reassurance that funding will be there now and in the future for any brownfield projects they may have.

GOPC has identified a potential source of funding for this program, which could be achieved without the need to raise taxes or fees to do so.

We know such a commitment may not be feasible at the moment but are willing to work with the legislature on the best path forward to ensure that this important program is able to continue to perform the important work it is undertaking in communities throughout the state.

Details on Programmatic Adjustments to Ensure All Ohio Benefits.

Funding of the BRP is not the only barrier standing in the way of the program reaching its full potential. While the current program has been a tremendous success, pumping out nearly three-quarters of a billion dollars in just four years' time, the current program design is one-sided in how funds are distributed.

While the BRP has provisions that provide \$1 million from each appropriation for every county in Ohio, the remaining \$262 million is awarded on a first-come, first-served basis. This system virtually ensures that a sophisticated county with fast internet can preload as many applications for grants on their computer as they want and simply send them en masse to the Development of Development (ODOD) when the application window opens, all but guaranteeing that those grant requests will be funded.

We understand that the most recent application period, which opened on February 19, hit its application amount threshold within hours. In previous rounds one county submitted the majority of the first thirty applications received.

The first come, first served design does not ensure that every county in Ohio is competing on a level playing field.

State Representatives Thomas Hall and Bride Sweeney have proposed important programmatic changes to the BRP which will shift the program from a first come, first served model to a merit-

based system, which scores applications reviewed by a panel of experts working with ODOD. This model mirrors Ohio's first brownfield program, the Clean Ohio Revitalization Fund (CORF). CORF was responsible for producing \$1.16 billion in one-time contributions and contributing \$1.4 billion annually to the state's Gross Domestic Product.

GOPC strongly believe it is imperative for Ohio to adopt these changes, introduced as HB93, to help ensure that Ohio can maintain its competitive advantage as a great place to do business. That is why we are working with the Representatives to have this language adapted as an amendment to the budget and ask the House to consider its inclusion in HB96.

#2: Ohio Housing Investment Opportunity Program.

One additional item I wish to address is the proposed Ohio Housing Investment Opportunity Program, which was included as part of the as-introduced budget. Under HB96, the program would appropriate \$100 million over the next two years to award grants and loans to local governments (or designees) in rural counties and counties that border other states for housing development projects. These grants would cover costs associated with site acquisition, demolition, site remediation, wetland mitigation, or the extension or enhancement of sewer, water, gas, and electricity services to the site designated for housing.

Priority may be given to sites designated for housing development that have previously received funding through the BRP as well as the Building Demolition and Site Revitalization Programs. We believe this is an essential priority that must be retained, moving forward.

Generally speaking, GOPC is in support of this initiative, which could be likened to an **All Ohio Future Fund** for housing. There is a strong, overwhelming need for housing development of the types outlined by the Ohio Housing Investment Opportunity Program across Ohio.

However, it is because this need exists in all 88 of Ohio's counties that we encourage the Legislature to consider modifying the program to remove the restrictions on what counties would be eligible to receive grants under the Ohio Housing Investment Opportunity Program. Projects could still be reviewed and assessed based on need and project viability, but because there is such a need for housing development everywhere in Ohio, we strongly believe that this new program, with all the potential it has, should be made available everywhere in the state.

Conclusion

Chair Hoops and members of the House Development Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide interested party testimony and for GOPC to share our views on what it will take to create the tools and policy environment Ohio needs to thrive in the years to come.