

**TESTIMONY TO THE
HOUSE FINANCE COMMITTEE
STATE REPRESENTATIVE BRIAN STEWART, CHAIR
FEBRUARY 11, 2025**

Chair Stewart and members of the House Finance Committee, good morning. I am Philip C. Richter, Executive Director of the Ohio Elections Commission, and am giving testimony on behalf of the Commission regarding the Commission's budget for the next biennium. Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to address the Committee on behalf of the Commission.

Since the Ohio Elections Commission commenced operations as an independent state agency on January 1, 1996, almost 23,000 cases have been filed with the Commission. In addition, 80 advisory opinions have been issued by the Commission.

The Commission carries out its mission with only 1 very capable full-time administrative assistant, along with a recently rehired part-time employee, that serve as additional staff along with me as Executive Director and Staff Attorney. Along with the 10 Commission members, comprised of three (3) regular Democrats, three (3) regular Republicans and one (1) independent, as well as the recently created positions of Alternate Members, who serve as replacements for the regular members when they cannot participate in a particular case or meeting, the now nine and one-half (9 1/2) persons on the Commission's payroll, as well as the Alternates, consume over 80% of the Commission's total budget. Although small, I believe that the staff of the Commission has been able to efficiently and effectively handle the array of cases filed with the Commission on a consistent basis. The Commission's caseload has been fairly consistent. Particularly since the Commission became an independent agency, aside from losing jurisdiction over Ohio's false statement statutes a number of years ago. The Commission has continued to have a steady caseload of campaign finance related cases submitted to us from among the 88

County Boards of Elections as well as from the office of the Secretary of State, in addition to the complaints filed with us by individuals from across the state.

As with the Commission staff, to date the operational needs of the Commission have remained fairly consistent. Increases have primarily been due to rising prices, generally such as higher postage costs, increased health insurance premiums, most of which are all beyond the control of Commission personnel. My staff and I have worked diligently to limit the Commission's expenditure levels. This budget does provide some additional resources to the Commission that will allow my staff and I to update our data and electronic filing capabilities and deal with a sharp increase in the amount of outside legal fees for which the Commission is responsible. Also, additional staff will be required as I anticipate that I will be retiring at some time before the end of the upcoming biennium. Alternatively, some of this increase will simply allow the Commission to continue to maintain its basic operations, as the Commission is currently involved with multiple legal challenges that necessitated the Attorney General's office to engage in outside counsel to defend the Commission and this cost alone could take up to 10% of the intended increase and all of these expenditures are beyond the control of the Commission staff. The budget recommendation does continue the realistic reliance on the Elections Commission Fund, based on the historic level of receipts to that fund. After essentially receiving consistent cuts to its budget starting in the mid-2000s, I believe that this recommended amount will allow the Commission to effectively operate and to improve some elements of its operations but is still difficult to totally assess due to the ongoing legal challenges for which the Commission is obligated to defend..

I believe that this budget recommendation continues to represent the frugal manner in which this Commission has conducted its operations since becoming an independent agency and

continues to reflect the economical manner in which the Commission will maintain its operations into this next biennium. Through difficult budget times, I believe that the Commission has continued to move cases through its processes and continues to perform its basic functions in an efficient and effective manner.

On behalf of the members of the Elections Commission, I again want to thank you for the opportunity to address this honorable Committee. I will do my best to answer any additional questions that you may have regarding the Commission, its current budget, this budget request, as well as our overall operations.

Thank you very much.