

House Finance Committee

Interested Party Testimony, House Bill 96 (Stewart)

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Tuesday, March 11, 2025

Chair Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney and members of the House Finance 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.

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 shrinking populations.

Earlier this year, [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 must continue to prioritize investment in the clean-up of brownfield sites while also investing in long-term planning that provides clear guidance on land use priorities throughout Ohio.

Issue 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 through the Brownfield Remediation Program. These funds have leveraged millions of additional private and public dollars, with clean-up work underway statewide. 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.

We are happy to inform the committee that to date, all \$700 million dollars that has been appropriated has been awarded or requested from the Department of Development. These dollars are being used in the clean-up and remediation of blighted properties in 86 of Ohio's 88 counties. While this is tremendous news, there remains more than 200 sites that have requested or received assessment grants – funds to determine the scope and plan of remediation for contamination – that will need clean-up dollars in the future.

Additionally, the current program design that awards grants on a first-come, first-serve model, has not worked well. The 20 counties with a population greater than 150,000, and which likely have the strongest internet connections in the state, account for nearly 70% of grants that have been awarded between April of 2022 and December of last year. This disproportionate distribution of funds could be avoided with a few simple tweaks to the existing program design model.

Request: Ongoing Funding for Brownfields with Programmatic Adjustment to Benefit All

GOPC has been working with brownfield professionals and other interested parties for more than 15 months to discuss ways to improve the brownfield remediation program. Through those consultations, we have come to conclusion that the Brownfield Remediation Program, or BRP, should shift closer to a merit-based application system that continues to provide funding to all of Ohio's counties. Currently, the program sets aside \$1 million per county in the first year of the budget, with the remaining funds awarded competitively. These funds have been a tremendous benefit to Ohio's counties and are the reason why we have seen such broad use of the funds statewide.

To ensure that all counties, especially our smaller ones, have an opportunity to compete for non-set-aside funds, we would recommend that not more than 20 percent of competitive funds be awarded to any one county. Additionally, it would be our recommendation that at least 25 percent of available funds on the competitive side be reserved for projects that have a dedicated end use. These changes would help to ensure that all of Ohio's counties have an opportunity to access funds that are needed to not only clean-up contaminated and dangerous properties, but also ensures that sites which are well-placed to site important development opportunities have access to the funds needed to create jobs or housing, or recreation space.

So projects can move forward in a timely manner, it would be our strong recommendation that language be added to the Ohio Revised Code that

- requests for funds be limited to a 30 day window,
- with a single entity making requests on behalf of the county, as determined by the county commissioners, and
- that the Department of Development issue award notifications for grants within 90 days after the close of the application window.

To ensure the program's success, we would recommend at-least \$100 million to \$150 million be allocated in each year of the biennium, with the \$1 million county set-aside funds limited to the first year, as currently authorized under the program. Unused funds from the first year would be carried over to the second year of the biennium.

Issue 2: Planning and Responsible Growth.

As I don't need to tell anyone here, planning is local. Local governments are eager to bring new residential, commercial, and industrial development to their communities but may not already have the expertise or financial resources needed to reach these goals. As previously mentioned, nearly 60% of the state's GDP comes from counties that are expected to experience population contraction; responsible growth and the state's partnership with these places will be essential for their long-term prosperity.

To help grow prosperity throughout Ohio, it is critical that communities undertake long-range local development planning. Ohio's cities and rural counties need comprehensive, long-range development plans. Such blueprints for the future should be based on realistic expectations around population trends and economic development opportunities. These types of plans will then help local leaders make strategic investments in roads, water, sewer, recreation, schools, and other public facilities. Development plans will also help to attract new housing and economic development, and protect against haphazard and unsustainable growth, which can detract from the quality of life.

Request: Adjust the Proposed Ohio Housing Investment Opportunity Program to Apply to All Ohio Counties

It is in the best interest of the state to provide financial and technical assistance to communities that want to do comprehensive development planning, which will ensure that state programs and resources are going to projects that build local, sustainable prosperity. Making the proposed Ohio Housing Investment Opportunity Program available communities in all counties could help to achieve this goal.

Conclusion

Chair Stewart and members of the House Finance 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.