

To: Chair Brian Stewart, Vice Chair Michael D. Dovilla, Ranking Member Bride Rose Sweeney, and Members of the House Finance Committee

From: Rhonda Graser

Date: 11 March 2025

Re: Proposed budget allotment for the Division of Natural Areas and Preserves General Revenue Fund (HB 96)

Chair Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney, and Members of the House Finance Committee, I am writing today to express my support for the proposed budget for the Division of Natural Areas and Preserves as presented in House Bill 96.

Like a lot of my generation, I grew up in the woods. I frequently climbed trees, fished, foraged for mushrooms, and caught fireflies. I learned a lot about the natural world just by watching it, and I believe it's imperative that future generations also have this opportunity.

Unfortunately, not everyone has access to a big backyard of forested areas. This is probably shrinking year by year. Ohio is very fortunate to have so many natural areas and nature preserves, and we Ohioans are thankful to have access to them. They provide a place for children to grow up learning about, appreciating, and recognizing the world around them.

My own children did not have the luxury of a wild backyard for most of their early years, and so we took advantage of the protected natural areas around us at every opportunity. We fished in rivers, we walked many trails, we visited waterfalls, and viewed so much wildlife. We have been curious together, learned together, and on many occasions, been in awe together. I'm not sure I can put into words the feeling when your child begins to recognize plants on their own or identify a bird call without asking you first.

Johnson Woods in particular has been a special place to us. As a family, we have spent many hours walking the boardwalk. Johnson Woods is an old growth forest full of spring vernal pools, wildlife, and beautiful native plants. There are quite possibly limitless opportunities to learn in that patch of woods. Every spring we go out to hear the spring peepers and see the ephemerals in bloom. During the summer we enjoy cool air under the canopy while we disconnect and find peace in the quiet. In the fall we search for ghost pipes peeking above the leaf litter. In a modern world where everyone, especially teens and young adults, is so focused on technology, allowing them to experience the wonder and tranquility of a preserved piece of land is truly a gift.

Preserving the proposed funding for the Division of Natural Areas and Preserves included in HB96 would ensure that this can continue. I have always been proud of Ohio and our willingness to keep our natural areas beautiful. We were the first state to designate an entire month for native plants! I do not doubt that this committee will continue to recognize and ensure that we and future generations can enjoy our nature preserves.