

**Ohio House Finance Committee**  
**House Bill 96 - Proponent Testimony**  
**Submitted by Larry Fletcher, President/CEO, Shores & Islands Ohio**  
**March 12, 2025**

Chair Stewart, Vice-Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Rose Sweeney, and all members of the House Finance Committee:

I am here today representing Shores & Islands Ohio, which is both the name of the marketing partnership between the Erie and Ottawa County Convention & Visitors Bureaus, and the region of Ohio our organization has the pleasure of promoting. Many of you on this committee have visited this region, and you know it to be one of the most popular tourism destinations in the Midwest.

Visitors are attracted to our region for a variety of reasons including Cedar Point, waterparks, special events, youth sports, waterfront communities, and the reason I am here today in support of strong funding for the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, outdoor recreation.

All who live in, work in, and visit the Shores & Islands region benefit in some way from sites managed by and resources protected by one or more ODNR departments. I am confident the same can be said for all parts of the state.

To cite some specific examples related to Shores & Islands, I am proud to say we have eight Ohio State Parks in our two-county area, five of which are on islands. They range in size from East Harbor, that at 1,831 acres with over 500 campsites is the largest in the state park system, to the smallest, the 1.5-acre Oak Point on South Bass Island that makes up for its tiny footprint by offering an incredible view of Gibraltar Island and Perry's Memorial across Put-in-Bay Harbor. These eight parks attract millions of visits annually, a combination of Ohioans and out-of-state guests, and these visits generate hundreds of millions in economic impact.

Many of these parks have marinas and feature other amenities such as hiking trails, launch ramps, watercraft rentals, fishing, primitive camping, educational programs, and much more. One even features the most visited lighthouse on all the Great Lakes, Marblehead Lighthouse State Park. I would like to point out that in partnership with ODNR's Division of Parks & Watercraft, we have a webcam installed at this site showing a view of the lighthouse and lake. This is one of the most popular pages on our website.

With over 150 miles of Lake Erie shoreline in our two-county region, and all the other outdoor recreation amenities in our area, there is rarely a week that passes without someone from our staff team interacting with a member of the ODNR team. These interactions show the breadth of the positive impact that the various divisions of ODNR have on our region of Ohio and across the state.

Some recent examples are:

- Hearing the outstanding 2025 fishing forecast from Division of Wildlife Fisheries Management experts at the Lake Erie Charter Boat Association Conference.
- Celebrating Ohio's focus on sustainable marina management at the ODNR Office of Coastal Management/Ohio Sea Grant Ohio Marina Conference.
- Celebrating the H2Ohio Program's milestone of supporting over 200 wetland projects across the state. These projects help slow nutrient loading into larger waterways, helping address the threat of harmful algal blooms.
- Helping plan Governor's Bird Ohio Day with Magee Marsh Wildlife Area staff.
- Working with the team at the Castalia State Fish Hatchery to install an underwater webcam in the outdoor trout run.
- Attending the ribbon cutting at the restored Lonz Mansion on the grounds of Middle Bass Island State Park.
- Taking our staff team to tour recent renovations and enhancements at the Glacial Grooves site on Kelleys Island.
- Attending the 2025 Ohio Parks & Recreation Conference where ODNR Director Mertz was inducted into the Ohio Parks and Recreation Association Hall of Fame.

And these are just a handful of the ways our organization and region benefit from just a few of ODNR's many divisions. ODNR's work across Ohio results in significant benefit to our health and well-being; our quality of life; our ability to attract out-of-state visitors, business owners, and future residents; and our safety and security while enjoying the outdoors.

ODNR's work also contributes greatly to economic impact for Ohio. In presenting economic impact, I often focus on the eight Ohio Lake Erie-bordering counties: Lucas, Sandusky, Ottawa, Erie, Lorain, Cuyahoga, Lake, and Ashtabula. In 2023, tourism-related impact alone from these counties was \$20 billion that supported over 131,000 jobs and generated \$2.6 billion in taxes. (Tourism Economics: The Ohio Visitor Economy 2023).

This is nearly 30% of the tourism impact for all of Ohio coming from just eight of 88 counties. To me, a testament to the power of Lake Erie to draw tourism and associated economic impact to the state. As I have mentioned, ODNR works across the Shores & Islands region in many ways to protect and enhance our outdoor recreation opportunities. That is certainly the case across Ohio's Lake Erie coast and throughout the state.

We are not that far from 2020 to remember that it was outdoor recreation that in many ways helped Ohio economically survive the covid pandemic. People gravitated to the outdoors in record numbers and a whole new audience of outdoor recreation enthusiasts was the result.

For those who have always loved and benefitted from the outdoors, and the continually increasing number of newcomers to outdoor recreation, I urge this committee to recommend maintaining strong funding for ODNR so the department can continue providing quality experiences and significant economic benefit for this great state. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony; I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.