

House Finance Committee
Interested Party Testimony, House Bill 96 (Stewart)
Mollie Fitzgerald, Director, Athens County Economic Development Council & Port Authority
Thursday, March 13, 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 Mollie Fitzgerald and I am the Director of the Athens County Economic Development Council and the Athens County Port Authority. I am testifying today to respectfully request the inclusion of continued funding for the Ohio Brownfield Remediation Program (BRP) in House Bill 96, the state's Main Operating Budget.

The Ohio General Assembly created the BRP in 2021 with an initial appropriation of \$350 million. Two years later, lawmakers renewed the program with a second appropriation of \$350 million. To date, the program has been responsible for the clean-up or assessment of more than 600 brownfield sites in 86 of Ohio's 88 counties. Importantly, 285 of these projects are underway in counties with a population of fewer than 70,000 people, and 355 are in counties with a population of less than 150,000.

These results not only show that brownfields are indeed a statewide problem but also show that there are opportunities for new economic development and revitalization in every region of Ohio.

The Athens County Port Authority has been a recipient of funds from the BRP. To date, the BRP funding has supported nine demolition and cleanup projects and five assessment projects. For example, the BRP supported the cleanup of a historic anchor in uptown Athens that sat vacant for over two years. The redevelopment of this building includes a much-needed extended stay hotel as well as three new businesses with associated job and payroll creation. This is just one of many examples of projects that are currently underway in Athens County.

As impressive as this work has been, the progress made over the past four years has just barely scratched the surface of what is needed to address brownfield remediation in Ohio. Of the grants that have been awarded since 2021, 279 have been assessment grants. Assessments just determine the scope of contamination that may exist on a site. The majority of these locations will need clean-up funds in order to ensure they are made available for future redevelopment opportunities.

This is why it is critical to continue funding for the Brownfield Remediation Program for at least the next two years.

As proud as we are with the work that we have been able to accomplish with the BRP, there have been issues with the current operation of the program. The first come, first serve nature of the BRP leaves Ohio's smaller counties at a disadvantage when seeking funding for remediation projects in their communities. This is why a majority of the sites that will need clean-up funds in the future (170) are in counties with a population under 150,000.

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 serve model to a merit-based system, which scores applications reviewed by a panel of experts working with the Ohio Department of Development. 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.

As someone who is directly involved in this work, I strongly believe it is imperative for Ohio to adopt these changes to help ensure that Ohio can maintain its competitive advantage as a great place to do business.

Please support a continued appropriation for the brownfield remediation program of at least \$200 million per year, along with the programmatic changes being proposed by Representatives Hall and Sweeney. This investment will unlock untold potential on the 9,000 plus former commercial and industrial brownfield sites across, while preserving agricultural land and green space from unnecessary development.

Chair Stewart and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide interested party testimony and 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.