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Ohio House Finance Committee Interested Party Testimony by Grace Gallucci Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency (NOACA) House Bill 96 (Stewart)

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, Ohio's State Fiscal Years 2026 – 2027 Operating Budget.

I am the Executive Director and CEO of the Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency (NOACA), the federally designated metropolitan planning organization (MPO) that conducts transportation and environmental planning for Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake, Lorain, and Medina Counties. NOACA also coordinates economic development planning through the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy that the agency developed in coordination with the U.S. Economic Development Administration/U.S. Department of Commerce. In addition, NOACA is a lead stakeholder in the 12-county Northeast Ohio Sustainable Communities Consortium (NEOSCC), also known as Vibrant NEO.

I am testifying today to support continued funding for the Ohio Brownfield Remediation Program (BRP) in House Bill 96, and to also support changes to the way these funds are distributed. The Ohio General Assembly created the BRP in 2021 with an initial appropriation of \$350 million, later adding an additional \$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. These results show that brownfields are indeed a statewide problem and show that there are opportunities for new economic development and revitalization in every region of Ohio.

NOACA has taken a proactive role in addressing the challenges created by brownfields. In partnership with Vibrant NEO, we received \$2 million from the U.S. EPA in 2022 and 2024 to create a Brownfield Revolving Loan Fund (RLF). These funds are available to public and private entities from throughout the 12-county Vibrant NEO region for brownfield projects aimed at creating economic development and jobs. Importantly, these funds can be used as a local match to Ohio BRP funding. Since its establishment in 2022, NOACA-Vibrant NEO RLF has approved four loans totaling \$1,508,000. Of those awards, two support projects utilizing funds from both the RLF and State of Ohio funding: one for asbestos abatement at a former Sears in Middleburg Heights, and the other for asbestos abatement and demolition at a former Firestone tire plant in Akron.

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 Northeast Ohio and throughout the state. Therefore, it is critical to continue funding for the Brownfield Remediation Program for at least the next two years.

Furthermore, NOACA supports legislation proposed by Representatives Thomas Hall and Bride Sweeney, HB 93, that would create important programmatic changes to the BRP. This legislation would 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 an organization that 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.

In sum, I respectfully ask this Committee and the Ohio Legislature to support a continued appropriation for the brownfield remediation program of at least \$100-\$150 million per year, along with the programmatic changes being proposed by Representatives Hall and Sweeney in HB 93. This investment will unlock untold potential on the 9,000 plus former commercial and industrial brownfield sites across Ohio, 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, allowing NOACA to express support for brownfield funding and policy that will help Northeast Ohio grow its economy and create new jobs in the years ahead.