

Ohio House Finance Committee

Opponent Testimony on House Bill 96

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Chair Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the Ohio House Finance Committee – thank you for this opportunity to offer written opponent testimony on House Bill 96.

The City of Cleveland wants to express its objection to the inclusion of the \$600 million bond package for the construction of a new domed stadium in Brook Park — a proposal advanced without local consensus and in direct conflict with long-term regional planning and public investment.

This proposed package breaks with longstanding precedent for how stadium funding has traditionally worked in Ohio. Historically, stadium projects begin with local collaboration. Once a viable, local plan is in place, the state might be asked to invest in the project — not the other way around. This top-down maneuver circumvents that process, undercuts the city and county most directly impacted, and risks setting a dangerous and expensive precedent.

Local consensus and input are essential as we have a deep understanding of the consequences of the Brook Park relocation, which would be far-reaching and harmful — not just to Cleveland, but to the regional economy and taxpayers. Essentially, the \$600 million in state-issued bonds would help facilitate a move that weakens one of Ohio’s largest metro areas — and benefits a single NFL franchise.

Cleveland is one of the few cities in the country that has three professional sports venues downtown. Together, these venues bring over 4.3 million visitors to Downtown Cleveland across more than 150 events annually. When you add the Huntington Convention Center, that number grows to nearly five million visitors and over 200 events per year. These venues energize our streets, drive hotel occupancy, and support small businesses year-round.

The stadium relocation, as a result, would deal a serious blow to these businesses at a time when our retail economy is still struggling to overcome the long-term effects of the pandemic. Restaurants, hotels, bars, and small retailers rely on the economic activity generated by Browns games. An economic impact study commissioned by the City of Cleveland estimates that the loss of the team downtown would cost the local economy more than \$30 million per year. That’s not just an abstract figure — that’s workers losing shifts, businesses losing revenue, and tax dollars no longer supporting critical public services.

The Haslam Sports Group’s proposal also would undermine decades of public investment in downtown Cleveland — from Huntington Bank Field itself to the convention center, Rocket Arena, Progressive Field, and other publicly supported assets that together create a thriving sports and entertainment ecosystem. Building a competing entertainment district would siphon off audiences, events, and development — fragmenting the market and weakening the return on the very investments the state, city, and county have made over years.

Additionally, the move threatens to slow Cleveland's lakefront redevelopment efforts, which are now gaining national recognition as well as federal and state support. The U.S. Department of Transportation awarded \$130 million in federal grants toward the North Coast Connector, a transformative infrastructure project that will finally connect downtown Cleveland to the Lake Erie shoreline. In addition, the State of Ohio allocated \$20 million toward this same project — a vital investment for which we are deeply grateful to the Legislature. The North Coast Connector — and the broader vision of a vibrant, walkable, accessible waterfront — depends in part on anchors like the stadium to drive foot traffic and catalyze mixed-use development. The Browns leaving now would drain momentum, disrupt planning, and diminish the value of these strategic investments.

For two years, Cleveland has been in discussions with the Haslam Sports Group to keep the Browns on the lakefront for a project that is less than half the cost. We want to continue working toward a solution that keeps the Browns in the city that has stood by them for decades. That's because we firmly believe a lakefront presence for the team can play a transformative role in Cleveland's continued comeback.

Meanwhile, the alternative site in Brook Park is poorly suited to deliver regional economic benefit. The former Ford Engine Plant site is 175 acres of industrial land surrounded by industrial and airport uses. It is served directly by the CSX and Norfolk Southern rail lines and represents one of the most valuable shovel-ready industrial sites in Northern Ohio. Building a domed stadium on this site is not the highest and best land use, will potentially impact airport operations negatively at nearby Hopkins International Airport, will likely require massive and as-yet unexamined infrastructure investments, and will hurt not just downtown businesses — but also existing retail and mixed-use centers throughout the region.

Finally, the use of \$600 million in public funding for a new domed stadium will not meaningfully advance Cleveland or Northeast Ohio's economy. Much of the claimed tax benefits from the stadium are not truly new to the region — they are simply shifts in existing economic activity. The financial projections supporting this deal also assume natural tax growth from the Browns organization that would likely occur regardless — whether at a new domed stadium or at a transformed lakefront stadium. The best way to grow our economy is by investing in industrial site preparation, workforce development, education, housing, and transformational lakefront and riverfront redevelopment. Public investment in those areas would go much further in advancing our city and region than spending it on a domed stadium on a desirable industrial brownfield by the airport.

I urge this Committee to remove the stadium bond package from the budget. This proposal sets a troubling precedent by bypassing local concerns and consensus. Further, this language undermines years of investment in Cleveland and diverts economic activity away from downtown and other parts of the region.

Thank you for your time and consideration.