

# WITNESS INFORMATION FORM

Please complete the Witness Information Form before testifying:

Date: 3/4/25

Name: Shannon Wells

Are you representing: Yourself ☐ Organization ☒

Organization (If Applicable): Morgan County Economic Development

Position/Title: Director

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Do you wish to be added to the committee notice email distribution list? Yes ☒ No ☐

Business before the committee

Legislation (Bill/Resolution Number): HB96

Specific Issue: ODNR budget support

Are you testifying as a: Proponent ☒ Opponent ☐ Interested Party ☐

Will you have a written statement, visual aids, or other material to distribute? Yes ☐ No ☒

(If yes, please send an electronic version of the documents, if possible, to the Chair's office prior to committee. You may also submit hard copies to the Chair's staff prior to committee.)

How much time will your testimony require? 10 minutes

Please provide a brief statement on your position: In support of the proposed ODNR budget

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**Testimony Before the Natural Resources Committee**  
**Budget Support for the Ohio Department of Natural Resources**

**Shannon Wells**

Director, Morgan County Economic Development

March 5, 2025

Chairperson Jones, Vice Chair Blasdel, Ranking Member Rogers and members of the Natural Resources Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Shannon Wells and I work for the Morgan County Commissioners and am the Economic Development Director for Morgan County. I am the treasurer for the Morgan County Convention & Visitor's Bureau and a small business owner. I am here today to express strong support for HB96 because of its vital impact on Morgan County's economy, tourism industry and natural resources.

My husband and I are lifelong residents of Morgan County, located in the Appalachian Region of Southeastern Ohio, where we raised our two sons. I have worked for local government and the Morgan County Commissioners for nearly 20 years. Over my career, I have personally written and administered over \$40 million in federal and state grants for various economic and community development projects. As a small business owner, I operate a short-term rental property, welcoming guests from around the world to experience our beautiful county. My passion for Morgan County motivates my work every day, and I strive to make a meaningful impact for those who live and do business in our community.

Morgan County is a rural community with a population of fewer than 13,700 residents and a small tax base. Historically, it has been an economically challenged area, with 17% of the population living in poverty, ranking among the poorest counties in Ohio. The county doesn't have a four-lane highway that passes through, making transportation for industry more challenging. And it doesn't have nice, flat, vacant acreage waiting for the next business investment. Rather, it has rolling hills and valleys that make economic development and business investment extremely challenging and sometimes nearly impossible. But here is what Morgan County does have, which makes it quite unique...

Morgan County is home to three state parks - Burr Oak State Park including the beautiful 664 acre Burr Oak Lake, Jesse Owens State Park home of the Big Muskie the world's largest dragline on display and The Muskingum River Parkway the only hand-operated lock system in the nation. Morgan County includes two wildlife areas that cover thousands of acres of public hunting land that attract thousands of hunters, anglers and campers annually. Together, the Appalachian Hills Wildlife Area and Jesse Owens State Park make up the largest contiguous area of public land in the state at over 58,000! TourismOhio released the Ohio Visitor Economic Study in June 2024. It documented a total economic impact of \$22.5 million for 2023 in Morgan County. This includes \$12.5 million of direct visitor spending. These numbers make a significant impact on a county that only has a \$5 million operating budget!

As you know, during the COVID-19 pandemic, state parks provided a crucial escape for visitors during lockdowns, areas like Hocking Hills saw overwhelming demand. It has become apparent that these natural attractions make Morgan County a hidden gem and it has been appropriately titled as "The Front Porch to the Great Outdoors" by the tourism board. Morgan County offers an alternative destination for travelers in southeastern Ohio, and welcomes thousands of visitors every year. I have seen firsthand how tourism supports small businesses in our rural area. Many of our local businesses cannot survive on local demand alone; they rely on visitors drawn by our natural attractions.

ODNR has made some recent major investments in Morgan County which we are very grateful for. The Muskingum River Parkway has received needed improvements to several locks and a dam replacement is currently underway in McConnelsville. The new Appalachian Hills Visitor Center will open later this fall. Construction of ten new overnight cabins is set to begin soon and the installation of full-service camping sites at Jesse Owens State Park just to name a few. These investments by ODNR are essential for growing and strengthening the outdoor tourism economy in Morgan County.

I am here today to support the proposed ODNR budget for the next fiscal year to provide the necessary staffing and resources to operate facilities associated with these capital improvements. It is essential to keep funding available to maintain a high level of operation with staffing to serve the public. This includes sufficient funding to keep an adequate number of wildlife officers to protect and serve our residents and visitors. Without adequate funding, these enhancements cannot be fully realized, limiting the economic potential of this investment.

I urge this committee to approve the ODNR budget request as proposed to ensure that small business owners and local governments can benefit from this tremendous land acquisition and its associated capital improvements. Investing in ODNR is an investment in Ohio's economy, environment, and communities.

Thank you for your time and consideration and welcome any questions.