



State Representative Justin Pizzulli

Sponsor Testimony – House Bill 540

House Ways and Means Committee

October 27, 2025

Chair Roemer, Ranking Member Troy, and members of the Ohio House Ways and Means Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present sponsor testimony on House Bill 540, legislation to require payments in lieu of taxes from certain conservation organizations.

Last year, I made it a personal mission to attend every township trustee meeting in Adams County, all fifteen of them, to hear directly from the men and women who keep our local governments running. And I can tell you, without exception, this issue came up in every single meeting.

At the heart of this bill lies a simple but serious question: how much non-taxable land is too much for one county to bear? How much should be expected of small townships asked to maintain roads and essential services when a growing portion of their land produces no tax revenue?

Adams County is one of the most beautiful places in Ohio, an Appalachian landscape home to the Great Serpent Mound and the Edge of Appalachia Preserve. But one conservation entity now owns more than 20,000 acres of land in our county, nearly 10.9 million dollar's worth of unimproved property, and pays nothing in property taxes, shifting the burden onto the backs of our farmers and the average homeowner.

According to the County Auditor, two of our townships, Brush Creek and Green, have seen more than a quarter of their total acreage purchased and removed from the tax rolls. Picture this: a township with no business district, just forest and a few roads. I sat in a metal chair in an old garage beside three trustees and a fiscal officer who asked me, with all sincerity, "Justin, will this entire township be bought up?" And honestly, I think that is a fair question.

Even in our state parks, the Ohio Department of Natural Resources pays back 2.5 percent of unimproved land value to local governments as a good-faith partner. House Bill 540

holds large conservation organizations, those owning over 15,000 acres in a single county, to that same standard.

According to our County Auditor, Adams County loses roughly \$889,000 dollars each year in foregone tax revenue, yet our population is only around 27,000 people. Under House Bill 540, according to the Legislative Service Commission, the entity in question would contribute about 250,000 dollars annually, a modest and reasonable amount compared to the strain our local governments face.

The National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities ranks Adams County as the third poorest county in Ohio. Add to that the loss of two of our largest employers over the past decade, the power plants, and you begin to see how our tax base has eroded. In effect, our current system keeps poor counties poor, not through neglect, but through outdated policy.

As written, the bill applies only to counties where one conservation organization owns more than 15,000 acres, meaning this is right now a local issue affecting Adams County alone. But I would ask the committee to imagine: if two townships in Franklin or Hamilton County suddenly found a quarter of their land untaxable, how long would it take for this body to act? Probably not long. Adams County deserves the same urgency and respect.

House Bill 540 ensures that when nonprofits hold vast amounts of land, they do their part to sustain the very communities that surround and support them. Our mission is one of fairness and partnership. I humbly ask for your support of House Bill 540, and I will be happy to take your questions following Representative Thomas's testimony.

Thank you for your time and consideration.