



4006 Pioneer Village Road
Waynesville, Ohio 45068

Testimony for the Ohio Senate Finance Committee Fiscal Year 2026

I would like to thank the committee and Chair Jerry Cirino for this opportunity to speak in support of funding for the Ohio Department Natural Resources Division of Parks and Watercraft for the fiscal 2026.

I am representing the Nature Center Association of Caesar Creek. We are a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization whose mission is “To help people of all ages connect with wildlife and the natural environment through educational and recreational programs.” We volunteer in collaboration with the park Director, Tiffany DeChant-Hunt and Erin Shaw, the Park Naturalist, for the Division of Parks and Watercraft of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources.

Since I became President in 2016, we have seen a steady increase in use of the park not only by Ohioans, but also out of state visitors. Just this past week I answered a Google voicemail forwarded from our website by a member of the Friends of Big Bone Lick State Park from Kentucky inquiring about our educational and recreational programs and the hours for visiting our nature center. He wanted to bring his grandchildren to up our park from Boone County to experience our nature center and to hunt for fossils. Our parks are great for tourism. They are also an economic driver for Ohio through boating registrations, campground fees, hunting and fishing licenses and the taxes paid on all the supplies needed to support these activities.

The number of visitors to Caesar Creek State Park from all over is increasing exponentially and will continue to do so especially with the designation of Fort Ancient as a World Heritage Site last year. We are located less than ten miles from these culturally significant earthworks and its museum complete with dioramas and artifacts.

We continually look for ways to make our park more accessible to all visitors. In 2024 we raised the funds in cooperation with the MLK Coalition of Lebanon to purchase a wheelchair that can be used out on our trails. The trail team volunteers from the nature

center strive to keep the trails for the public open even in the face of the severe storms we have experienced this past year.

Last year we opened the Janet Lasley Gardens and Educational area around the nature center which is still a work in progress. This includes the removal of invasive nonnative plants and replacement with native flowers and plants complete with the construction of a replica of Monet's Bridge over the pond. Starting this May and continuing until October, the nature center is undergoing major interior renovation with funds provided by the ODNR. This update will bring even more visitors to the nature center and the park.

We assist with all types of programs that the Park Naturalist conducts which are open and free to the public. Ohio is one of the few states that do not charge admission to the park. One of the most popular programs is the watercraft safety courses using kayaks and canoes at the campground waterfront complete with waterfowl sightings. There is always a big turnout for these by our visitors who enjoy getting out on the water safely with their children. We also help with the nature walks on the hiking trails and introductory fishing courses along with hosting the nature center. Erin Shaw, our Park Naturalist, has just started a new program to educate the public about the importance of the dark sky.

Being outdoors and experiencing nature around us has proven to be beneficial to physical and mental health. The public continues to recognize this fact especially since the pandemic. Since we are lucky to have a marina in our park. The traffic on and around the water has increasingly provided recreational boating, fishing, and hunting for multitudes of visitors.

I would like to encourage the committee to look strategically at the future of the use of our state parks and designate the appropriate funds to continue improving the outdoor experiences of all Ohioans and out-of-state visitors. I appreciate the opportunity to speak in person with your committee.

Thank you,

Rick Hoffman

President Nature Center Association of Caesar Creek