

Chair Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Ingram, Members of the Education Committee:

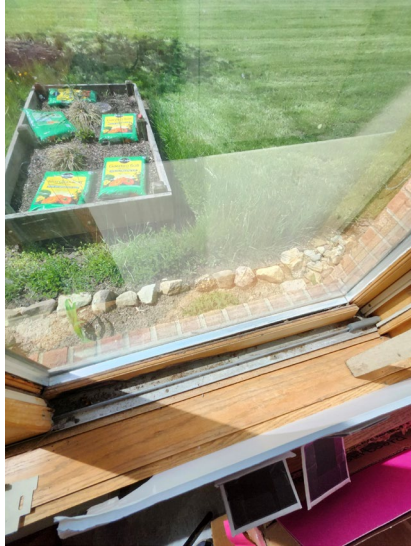
My name is Jonathan Harris, I present this testimony today as Director of the Portage County District Library, and an interested party in Am. Sub. H.B. No. 96. I humbly urge all members of this committee to restore the language put forth in the Governor's Budget Proposal regarding the funding of Ohio's Public Libraries through the Public Library Fund. This proposal builds on a history of funding that has served Ohioans well over the past decades, and is the reason that our Public Libraries are regularly considered world-class institutions. As the Director of a system which was previously reliant on the PLF for 95% of our funding, I believe I can offer some insight on the importance of this issue.

As a primer, Ohio's Public Libraries currently have two available avenues of funding, the Public Library Fund, and voter-approved property tax levies. Libraries are not considered in inside millage or the recipient of other tax revenue, they are also unable to be considered in the Capital Budget. Many of you on this committee have districts that include some of the 48 libraries which rely solely on the PLF for funding. I believe Senator Cutrona may be in the lead with six library systems, serving roughly 100,000 of his constituents. I know that there have been questions put forward by this committee regarding things like makerspaces and chair yoga programs, I can steadfastly assure you that for PLF-only libraries, what we're talking about here is the ability to keep the lights on and continue to do the people's work.

Our system has a history of being fiscally conservative and finding every possible cost-savings for our patrons. As an example, relying on our local communities to provide the space for our branch locations has been the only way that we have been able to serve two cities, four villages, and sixteen townships. When PLF revenues were cut during the 2009 recession, it led to the closure of a branch, reduced hours across our entire district, and major cutbacks in outreach services to rural areas. It also meant that our system had to put on pause any attempts at updating our locations. Ten years later in 2019, the southern half of our district was being served by one branch, located in a repurposed service garage, which was only open 25 hours a week. It was only in November of 2021, when the voters of Portage County voluntarily chose to increase their property taxes in support of the library, that we were able to restore the level of service we provided pre-2009. We are still in the process of working to address building maintenance and repairs which have been deferred for decades (pictures included on later pages).

If one were to look at the amount of public money spent on libraries in 2008 and adjust it for inflation, they would find it remarkably similar to the amount spent today. The difference is where it comes from, with the PLF essentially stagnant and hundreds of millions of dollars every year being moved to the tax burdens of local property owners. In light of the increased need for our services, and the current burden of local property taxes, this is an unsustainable trend. As it currently exists, the PLF being tied to the General Revenue Fund is both fiscally sound and future-proof. That Public Libraries have a vested interest in the financial well-being of the state means that we have every reason to contribute toward it, as seen by our regular 5-1 return on investment dollar for dollar. The idea of moving the PLF to a line-item, which could be reappropriated, cut, or conceivably vetoed puts this historic partnership at risk, and could very easily result in a much worse deal for Ohio's taxpayers. Put simply, the PLF is the best way to make sure that Ohio's tax dollars go to libraries who most need it to do the work of serving our communities.

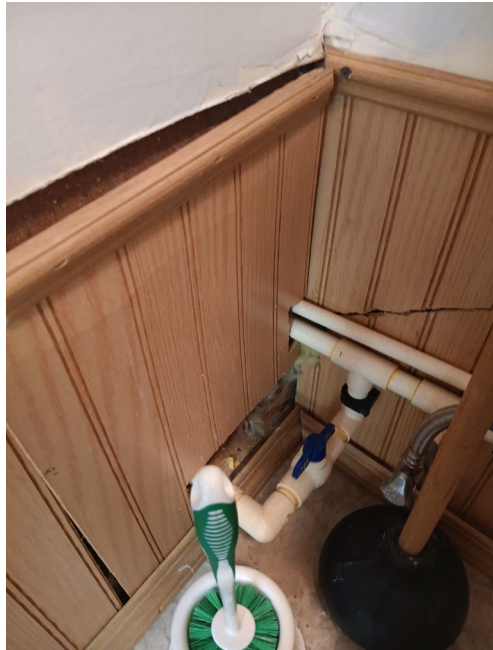
Yours in service,
Jonathan Harris



Window that has fallen through its casement at Streetsboro Branch, currently held together with tape.



Water damage from roof at Windham Branch. This location, housed in a former school, has seen repeated temporary closures due to a faulty HVAC system.



Wall damage in the public restroom of the Randolph Branch. This branch, housed in a former service garage, would take significant renovation to meet minimum ADA requirements.