

Jim Stouffer
Owner & CEO, Catawba Island Club
Board Member, Shores & Islands Ohio

Chairman Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Finance Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on House Bill 96 and specifically amendment SC 0197.

My name is Jim Stouffer, President and CEO of Catawba Island Club, one of the largest private employers in Ottawa County.

I am writing to express strong concern with amendment SC 0197, which would permit the redirection of lodging tax revenues without the transparency and consultation with the businesses that generate them. These funds are essential-not just for tourism and marketing, but for the broader community and economic development they enable.

I have been working in the hospitality industry for over 50 years, and was in fact on the first board of the Ottawa County Visitors Bureau when it was formed in the mid-80's.

When Northern Ohio was going through economic decline, tourism in many ways is what saved our region. I was a witness to these challenges, and was there to see us emerge from them to what is now a thriving region.

Success like this does not come from isolated efforts. It is the result of intentional collaboration, and in our case specifically, between Erie and Ottawa Counties. Our region's strong tourism economy is guided and supported by the work of Shores & Islands Ohio.

Tearing down this structure as our region is thriving because of that partnership would be taking a big step backward. We need to sustain the momentum our region is experiencing by continuing to operate with a spirit of collaboration and transparency.

We urge this committee to reconsider amendment SC 0197 and the impacts it will have on our tourism economy. We believe dialogue about the future of tourism investment is both timely and essential – but it must start with honest conversations at the local level.

Again, I would like to thank Chair Cirino and the members of this committee for their time. I would be more than happy to answer any questions the Committee may have.