

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, Members of the Senate Finance Committee:

My name is Jonathan Harris, I come before you with this testimony today as the Director of the Portage County District Library and an interested party in Am. Sub. H.B. No. 96. When I was growing up, my father, a now-retired former Director of the Medina County District Library, used to keep an absolutely beautiful copy of “Don Quixote” on display in our living room. That kind of early exposure to literature may also explain why I am here before you today.

At this point, members of this committee and others have already heard testimony from OLC, as well as library directors whom I would happily turn to for expert advice. All of these directors urged a return to the Governor’s proposal on funding public libraries. I am disappointed that, despite the best advice of leaders in my field, the Senate has moved in a different direction.

In addition to the change in funding from a percentage of GRF to a line-item, the version of the budget currently under consideration includes language that would require changes in how public libraries shelve certain items. As an example, this language would require us to move Anne Frank’s “The Diary of a Young Girl” away from the view of anyone under the age of 18. This is not for any anti-Semitic reasons, but because the title makes an obvious reference to the author’s gender identity. Other Directors have shared the budgetary impacts that adhering to this language might cause, in deference to their calculations, I merely wish to highlight the absurdity. I did not enter public service to hide books from children.

The version of the budget currently under consideration also modifies the source of funding for state and regional library services from the GRF to the “PLF” line-item. This change from the House proposal of the budget will effectively undo the modest increase that was included after receiving thousands of calls and letters from their constituents. It effectively decreases annual funding to Ohio’s Public Libraries not just below the Governor’s proposal, but even below the House’s proposal.

I must also strongly object to language included in the budget that would allow county budget commissions to decrease the millages of voter-approved levies. During the 2009 financial crisis, and the resulting cuts to the PLF, many public libraries turned to their voters for support. Without a meaningful restoration of that state funding in the past 16 years, the increasing costs of our service have been shifted to local property taxes. When PCDL secured its first local funding levy in 2021, we made sure to clearly advertise our goals, and not ask for more money than would be required to accomplish them. Public libraries all across Ohio show an amazing return on investment for our taxpayers, and while the services we offer may differ by location and the needs of our communities, we remain responsible stewards of that public trust.

This provision would allow a county budget commission to effectively nullify any future increases to local property tax millages that voters might approve. As written, this could result in reducing increases to the previous year's amount, and reducing additional or new levies to effectively 0. In the event of any possible future cuts in state funding, this is a recipe for disaster.

I present this testimony as a Library Director, but also as a parent. I want to ensure that the excellent services of Ohio's public libraries extend to the next generation, the same way that my father did for me. Much like all of you, I entered into public service to help solve problems. When doing so, I like to find the best information available and take the next steps accordingly. Throughout this budget process, you have received expert advice on how to support our public libraries. I would humbly ask that you consider it, and use it to guide your decisions.

Thank you for your time today. I am available for, and would welcome any questions the committee might have.

Yours in service,

Jonathan Harris