

## OHIO SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE

### *Opponent Testimony on House Bill 96*

*Jeff Epstein  
Chief Integrated Development Officer, City of Cleveland  
June 6, 2025*

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Finance Committee – thank you for the opportunity to submit written opponent testimony on the current version of House Bill 96. I write today on behalf of the City of Cleveland to express strong opposition to the proposal to direct \$600 million in public funds toward the construction of a new domed stadium in Brook Park.

We understand that the Senate substitute budget does not propose issuing bonds backed by the General Revenue Fund as initially put forward, but instead proposes drawing the money from the state's unclaimed property fund. While the funding mechanism has changed, the underlying problem remains: using \$600 million in public resources to subsidize the relocation of the Cleveland Browns from downtown Cleveland, with opposition from local governments and in direct conflict with long-term regional planning and public investment.

This proposal departs from long-standing precedent. Stadium projects in Ohio have traditionally started with local collaboration and consensus. Only then does the state consider contributing. This proposal inverts that model — sidestepping local input, circumventing established planning processes, and risking a dangerous precedent for top-down, state-led deals.

Cleveland is one of a handful of cities in the country with three professional sports venues located downtown. Together, these venues drive over 4.3 million visits annually. Visitors support hotels, restaurants, bars, small retailers, and hundreds of local workers. Relocating one of our cornerstone teams would destabilize Cleveland's economic ecosystem and drain over \$30 million in annual activity from the heart of our city — a direct blow to our downtown and businesses.

The proposal also would undermine decades of public investment in downtown Cleveland — from Huntington Bank Field itself to the Convention Center, Rocket Arena, Progressive Field, and other publicly supported assets that together create a thriving sports and entertainment ecosystem. Building a competing entertainment district in Brook Park would siphon off audiences, events, and private development — fragmenting the market and weakening the return on the very investments the state, city, and county have made over years.

It also jeopardizes one of the most significant public development efforts in Ohio: Cleveland's lakefront redevelopment. With strong public-private momentum, the City has finalized a master plan, established a dedicated development entity, and secured over \$150 million in state and federal funds — including \$20 million from the State of Ohio, for which we are grateful — to begin transforming the North Coast into an accessible, mixed-use destination anchored by a transformed stadium. A domed stadium in Brook Park would undercut this momentum, delay development, and weaken the return on this investment.

Until last year, the Haslam Sports Group (HSG) was a committed partner in these efforts. A transformed lakefront stadium was their preferred option — and it remains the fiscally and logistically sounder path. It would cost less than half of the \$2.4 billion Brook Park proposal and build upon existing infrastructure, rather than demand new, unexamined public investments.

The Brook Park site, by contrast, sits on a 175-acre industrial site adjacent to rail lines and Hopkins International Airport. Redeveloping it into a stadium rather than reserving it for future job-creating industrial use is not the highest and best use of that land. Furthermore, economic claims tied to this project misrepresent economic impact as new activity; the economic impacts are simply being siphoned from existing locations.

Public funds — whether from the General Revenue Fund or the unclaimed property fund — should be used to strengthen cities, not undermine them. Investing in housing, infrastructure, workforce development, and lakefront transformation would deliver far greater returns to the state than subsidizing a new NFL stadium on an industrial brownfield.

I respectfully urge the Committee to remove the \$600 million allocation from the budget and ensure that no public funds — regardless of funding mechanism — are directed to support a new domed stadium in Brook Park. Cleveland stands ready to partner with the State of Ohio to pursue a more responsible, cost-effective stadium solution on the lakefront — one that builds on existing investments and delivers shared economic benefit to the entire region.

Thank you for your time and thoughtful consideration.