

**Opponent Testimony**  
**HB 96: Make state operating appropriations for FY 2026-27**

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Good afternoon, Honorable Chair Manchester, Vice Chair Brenner, Ranking Member Weinstein, our own Senator DeMora, and all members of the committee. My name is Emily Keeler and I serve as Council President in the City of Grandview Heights. I am here today to testify about HB 96, the state operating budget, and its impacts on Grandview Heights.

I'm sure many of you have been to Grandview Heights. We are an 'inburb' just under two miles to the west of where I stand today. We are bordered by the Olentangy and Scioto Trails. People move to and visit our community because of its walkability. In fact, I'll most likely be walking home today on these trails.

I'm deeply concerned about language in House Bill 96 that would remove recreational trails from the definition of "public use" in Ohio's eminent domain law. I am even more concerned because I was also standing before a different committee in 2023 to testify on this same subject when this idea was first brought up and ultimately failed, and with good reason.

Trails are integral to a community's quality of life and offer numerous benefits to residents and visitors alike. They provide space for health and wellness activities, which is needed now more than ever as Ohio is now in the top ten for obesity. Trails are also a key component in our transportation network, connecting neighborhoods to jobs, schools, health care, retail, and greenspace. While named 'recreational', many people in Central Ohio also use trails for transportation to and from work or school, including myself who uses the Olentangy Trail to get to my day job at The Ohio State University. It is used by my 18-year-old son who does not yet drive a car, and provides a safe way for him, and others who do not drive, to use his bike or a scooter to get around Central Ohio.

Perhaps most importantly, residents also like them. In a statewide survey conducted by the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, over 82 percent of respondents indicated trails are "extremely important" or "very important" to their daily lives. When asked what prevents them from using trails, 42 percent of

respondents answered that there are not enough trails, and 35 percent said trails are too far away. This survey reaffirms what we already hear from our residents: trails and greenways are a resource people value. Restricting our ability to expand and enhance them will only hinder us from improving the overall quality of life for our community.

But it's not just our community. I was in Lexington, Ohio just this past Thursday where the Richland B&O Trail is located. Not only did I enjoy the trail, I was able to support the local economy of shops and restaurants that have built up around this walking and biking highway. This community is not unique. There are many cities, small towns, and rural areas that benefit from the tourism, health benefits, and park area such as some of my favorites: Akron, Canton, and Yellow Springs. Trails are a use that benefits everyone. For these reasons, I firmly believe it is in the best interest of communities to have the primary say in how best to manage or acquire trails and greenspace. These natural features are the lungs of any community, and that community's preferences are critical to its ability to self-govern and thrive.

In addition to walkability and access to trails, the City of Grandview Heights is home to one of the best school districts in the state and is another reason why our residents chose this community. We often collaborate with the school on projects to ensure the best service to our residents. A proposal in HB 96 includes a provision that would limit school districts' cash reserves to 30% of their annual operating budget, a measure intended to provide "tax relief" to local taxpayers, but that has a perhaps unintended and harmful effect. Not only will this proposal not provide tax relief or reduce the funding needed to operate schools, it will result in tax collection timing differences that jeopardize the financial stability of school districts and create unpredictable tax obligations for taxpayers. In our own personal finances, we create a budget and save for big purchases or unexpected expenses. The City of Grandview Heights did this in order to build a new municipal complex and parks building. Why would we prevent schools from doing the same, especially when it would create more uncertainty for both schools and property owners and cost everyone more time and money in the long run. Again, dictating to school districts or school boards how best to govern themselves ends up creating long-term challenges for districts and the communities where residents choose to raise their families.

I'd be remiss if I did not also mention our wonderful library, another City partner that provides an enhanced quality of life. These institutions are not only providing typical library services, they provide concerts, guitars and game lending, research services, job search assistance, free computer services, summer concerts, and acts as a safe place for kids who may be too old for after school care but too young to spend afternoons on their own to hang out, even providing programming specifically for this age group. It is imperative that this budget cycle do everything possible to support our amazing community treasures, especially at a time when they are under assault from federal funding cuts.

As a representative of my City, I also cannot speak before you without expressing my support for increases in the Local Government Fund, infrastructure dollars, and support for passenger rail. Our aging infrastructure systems need to be replaced for the safety of the residents in Grandview Heights, and all communities throughout Ohio. Passenger rail is a potential game changer that could bring in more workers, tourism, and ultimately, revenue for our cities to continue to provide the best and safest services for our communities. Please support efforts that will make Ohio tops in innovation and job creation.

Thank you for listening to my testimony today. I am more than happy to answer any questions.