

Lauren Williams
Written-Only Testimony on H.B. 96
May 13, 2025
(for May 14, 2025 Government Oversight and Reform Committee Hearing)

Chair Manchester, Vice Chair Brenner, Ranking Member Weinstein, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide written-only opponent testimony on H.B. 96. I am sorry I cannot be present in-person to be able to dialogue with you. I only found out about some of the extensive changes proposed in H.B. 96 over the weekend – in particular, those having nothing to do with appropriations.

I am a resident of Ohio Senate District 7. I grew up in Ohio, and recently moved back to be closer to family. Unfortunately, I do not recognize this state as the place I grew up in, and it makes me deeply distressed to see what all of us and our children will have to confront if this bill passes.

I oppose H.B. 96 in part because it will directly impact me, as someone I also oppose H.B. 96 because of how it will directly impact me, as someone who enjoys our public parks and trails, directly benefitted from libraries growing up, and is part of the LGBTQIA+ community.

I also oppose H.B. 96 because it has buried, in a 5000-plus page document the following (as examples):

- substantial changes to Ohio's government and to the authority of municipalities;
- controversial language such as the definition of biological sex and gender identity;
- removing Ohioans from having a direct say on state boards or in who serves in certain positions;
- burdening libraries with new requirements; and
- changing the long-running, Republican-instituted library funding mechanism.

In the process, the bill fails to address many pressing appropriations issues, including the state's vicious property-tax/school funding cycle.¹

Ohioans deserve to know what is being considered by their state legislators. This bill is at least five times longer than Obamacare. Ohioans should not have to accept passage of this bill to find out what is in it.

¹ The cycle is: state funding for schools drops/stays the same; districts must pass levies to fund operations; approved levies increase property taxes, as do reassessments; property taxes become too burdensome for many and property tax relief discussions begin – all without addressing the underlying problem.

My written testimony will address only some of my concerns with H.B. 96, but I respectfully implore the Committee, in its oversight role especially, to press “pause” on this entire process.

H.B. 96 Centralizes Authority in Select State and County Officials, and Removes Power from Communities and Voters

I will highlight only three examples here. However, the result of these changes, is that the Governor and a select group of elected officials such as the Secretary of State, will gain tremendous authority and control over matters previously trusted to decentralized boards and commissions, and to voters. This result further increases the politicization of elections, what is taught in schools, and who serves as our Auditor General, as whatever party in power can dictate far more major, impactful policy changes without having to answer to Ohioans.

One example is the elimination of the Ohio Elections Commission. Another example is changing the Auditor General to an appointed position, instead of an elected one. Ohioans need a fiscal watchdog who is beholden to them, directly, instead of other state officials. The last example is the elimination of *all* elected members of the Ohio Board of Education. My grandfather proudly served for over a decade as a local elected member of the Board of Education, elected from the Beavercreek/Greene County area. Removing *all* local say in what our schools teach and how they help young Ohioans learn and grow speaks both to a potential distrust in local communities, and a desire to ease the way for controversial policies – by either party – that otherwise would not be supported by Ohioans.

Elimination of Eminent Domain Authority for Non-Motorized Trails

I echo the concerns from municipalities and others about the exclusion of non-motorized trail development from being a “public use”. I live less than a five-minute drive from the Little Miami trail. Trails are not just for recreation either – they help connect those without vehicles to necessary services. Such development is clearly a public use.

Public Library Changes, Lack of Funding, and New Burdensome Requirements

I benefitted from having grown up where I could visit three different libraries once I could drive. I repeatedly volunteered in the summer at my local library. The public libraries near me and the books each had served as a refuge for me, who was thirsty to learn about science, environmental issues, astronomy, and good fantasy. fiction to escape the world.

H.B. 96 undoes so much of that good.

First, I echo comments that the Library Fund should remain as it presently stands under Ohio law. Removing the automatic funding mechanism politicizes library funding more than it already is. I also echo comments that the percentage of funds should be increased.

Second, H.B. 96 potentially politicizes library boards of trustees by shortening the years served by each member.

Third, H.B. 96 forces on libraries new, vague, and unfunded mandates at the same time as threatening the security of library funding. The proposed requirement that libraries place all material “related” to sexual orientation and gender identity out of the public view of minors is so broad that, as one commenter noted, the entire library could be off-limits. All of the following are mere examples of what could fall under H.B. 96’s language:

- A board book with a married mom and dad (heterosexual-appearing couple) depicted
- A book with a teenage romance between a boy and a girl (same issue)
- An educational book on world religions that discusses how other faith traditions conceive of human gender, biological sex, and/or sexual orientation
- An encyclopedia that includes reference to a culture or tribe that does or did have more expansive views on human gender identity than this bill
- A country factual reference book on Belgium noting that it legalized same-sex marriage in 2003
- Books on human sexuality and puberty geared toward teens
- A fiction novel that includes someone getting their first period or undergoing puberty and struggling with body changes (without mention of gender dysphoria)
- Basic high school anatomy textbooks or similar items
- The entire periodicals section
- All research databases

H.B. 96 appears to assume there is some “default” or “correct” sexual orientation or gender identity. That is incorrect. Still, if H.B. 96 intends to make that pronouncement, it should say so, and it should provide the funding to libraries to implement such a monumental task. Ultimately, what H.B. 96 asks of libraries is to close off an important place – like I had – for kids to learn, study, and explore the world.

Biological Sex and Gender Identity Definition

H.B. 96’s definition of “sex” is not based in science, but in one type of worldview. It erases the approximately 2% of the population that are intersex and thus are neither

biologically male or female. Being intersex is different than gender identity. Intersex people may have chromosomes and outer appearances (from birth) that do not match. They may also have other hormone related congenital conditions that again make them neither biologically male or female. Interestingly, Judaism, in the Talmud, has recognized this for far longer than the Western world.

As for gender identity, as an LGBTQIA+ person, I ask - why is the legislature so concerned with how people choose to define themselves? Freedom includes individual ability to be oneself. I still do not fully understand myself and I am approaching the age at which some people start to have mid-life crises. This is my business, and not that of the Ohio legislature. I also echo those commenters expressing their opposition because of the hate it represents.

Lastly, these provisions interfere with the religious freedom of those faiths that do not adhere to these categories.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide opponent testimony today. I wrote this very quickly because of the time crunch, so I apologize for any typos, and that I cannot provide more references to outside sources. However, I am happy to supplement if there is another hearing.

Respectfully,
Lauren Williams