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Committees:

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Chair **O'Brien**, Vice-chair **Gavarone**, Ranking Member **Smith**, and members of the Senate **Local Government** Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony for Senate Bill **122**, which regards local authority for agricultural land zoning resolutions.

In Ohio, agriculture is essential to both the state's economy and social fabric of our communities. As of 2022, Ohio had approximately 13.7 million acres of farmland, according to the USDA's Census of Agriculture, and about 75,800 farms in 2023, according to the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service Great Lakes Regional Office. At that same time, the number of farms in the United States was estimated at 1,894,950, which saw a decrease of about 5,700 farms from 2022. The state of Ohio has experienced a decline in both the number of farms and the amount of land under cultivation, or specifically the croplands. Between 2002 and 2022, Ohio lost about 931,089 acres of farmland representing a 6.4% decrease over the state's overall farmland in the 20-year period. This trend is largely attributed to urban development, with approximately 180,691 acres of agricultural land converted for this purpose, which accounted for approximately 51% of the agricultural land loss between 2001 and 2021.

When we talk about these vanishing farms, we are not only talking about our state's gross domestic product, or even the plight of the individual families whose farms have been lost. We are also talking about the profound food insecurity that we see happening across the nation. This food insecurity is not only instigated by the fresh food deserts where grocery stores do not serve fresh produce or inflation that has outpaced the rate of wage increases for the typical American. It is also the farms lands that continue to disappear in favor of urban development. As Ohio continues to build new structures to create more jobs in the state, this issue will become more and more pressing not only for the newcomers that we welcome, but for the life-long Ohioans who do not have affordable, nutritious options in their local communities.

Senate Bill **122** will not only help to feed Ohioans by growing the best food possible locally, but it will also help to bolster Ohio's agricultural industry. An industry which our state depends on to continue to have an attractive economy to new arrivals and maintain our state operations.

The primary provision of Senate Bill **122** is to eliminate the authority of townships and counties to adopt zoning resolutions for agricultural land for projects that would prohibit landowners from building agricultural structures on land which was primarily used for agricultural purposes. Additionally, properties with a farm market where 50% or more of the lands income result from agricultural production on said property would also be exempt from being zoned out of a township or county, though the board of county commissioners may still hold some regulating power related to certain safety specifications of the property.

This legislation will help to protect urban agricultural ventures which already exist to keep Ohioans fed, while also encouraging new and current urban farmers to create and expand projects that will help to propel our urban agricultural industry forward. These projects will allow growers not only to continue traditional production methods, which have been tried and true, but to expand with science and to use land once thought to be unsuitable for growing once our urban and suburban communities began to develop around them.

Beyond this main provision of prohibiting counties and townships from zoning out urban farms, this bill will also help to stimulate the agricultural industry in Ohio by removing the county board of commissioners' powers to prohibit biodiesel production, biomass energy production, or electric and heat energy production if the land on which the production facility is located qualifies as land devoted exclusively to agriculture. Furthermore, while a county board of commissioners may regulate certain factors pertaining to agrotourism, they will also be prohibited from zoning these properties out of a county or township, as well.

I urge this committee to bring forward proponent testimony for Senate Bill 122, so that we can ensure a bright future not only for Ohio's economy and agricultural industry, but for each individual and community within our state borders. At this time I welcome any questions that the committee may have.