



**Senate Local Government Committee**  
**Karen L. Hesser, Chief Executive Officer, Five Rivers MetroParks**  
**House Bill 309**  
**November 12, 2025**

Chair O'Brien, Vice Chair Gavarone, Ranking Member Smith, and members of the Senate Local Government Committee:

My name is Karen Hesser, and I serve as the CEO of Five Rivers MetroParks, a nationally recognized, voter-supported park district serving Montgomery County. With 18 parks, more than 15,000 acres of protected land, and more than 340 miles of regional trails, MetroParks protects natural resources, provides safe and accessible outdoor recreation and education, and contributes to the economic vitality of Dayton, Montgomery County and our surrounding communities. We operate with a lean workforce, strong partnerships, and disciplined, transparent financial management. Its mission is to protect natural areas and provide safe, accessible outdoor recreation and education opportunities that enhance quality of life, attract a skilled workforce, and strengthen the local economy. Through careful, conservative fiscal management, Five Rivers MetroParks ensures that every taxpayer dollar is invested wisely and sustainably for future generations.- stretching voter-approved funding through conservative budgeting, capital reserves, and proactive maintenance, so we can avoid emergency levies and costly surprises.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding House Bill 309.

I want to commend both the House and Senate for the thoughtful deliberation and improvements made throughout the legislative process. The revisions made in the House - such as the limitation of County Budget Commission authority to after the fifth year of a levy cycle - represent meaningful progress and demonstrate a genuine effort to balance oversight with local responsibility. Likewise, we appreciate this Committee's continued diligence in examining the structure, definitions, and safeguards within this bill.

That spirit of collaboration reflects what Ohioans expect - government that is fiscally responsible, locally accountable, and focused on long-term stability.

However, even as amended, **House Bill 309 still presents serious unintended consequences for local park districts** like ours.

Our long-term reserves are not idle funds; they are responsible savings that keep parks safe, bridges sound, and facilities open without asking voters for more. Under HB 309, these carefully managed balances could be misinterpreted as "excess" and redirected - undermining the very fiscal prudence this legislature encourages.

If county budget commissions can reduce disbursements mid-cycle, it injects uncertainty into our planning, limits our ability to respond to emergencies, and erodes voter trust. When local agencies cannot plan with confidence, taxpayers ultimately pay more - through deferred maintenance, lost grants, or diminished services.

Five Rivers MetroParks operates much like a business, managing assets, infrastructure, and operations with conservative, forward-looking fiscal discipline. Our 10-year levy cycles are designed to stretch every voter-approved dollar across the full term of the levy. That means planning, setting aside funds for major capital repairs, equipment replacement, and emergency response - the same sound budgeting principles any responsible business or household would use.

For an agency such as Five Rivers MetroParks, this unpredictability threatens essential community functions - from maintaining safe and open parks to ensuring public safety, outdoor education, and environmental stewardship. When local agencies cannot plan with confidence, taxpayers ultimately pay more - either through delayed maintenance, emergency repairs, or diminished public services.

Ohio's park districts, like Five Rivers MetroParks, are models of efficient conservative government. We operate leanly, leverage volunteers, and generate significant private and philanthropic investment to multiply the impact of every public dollar - all while enhancing quality of life, workforce attraction, and property values.

We share the General Assembly's commitment to responsible financial management. but HB 309, as written, would hinder, not promote, that responsibility. It shifts control away from local voters, introduces instability into a proven funding system, and weakens the foundation on which Ohio's park districts operate.

For these reasons, despite our appreciation for the work that has gone into this bill, and on behalf of Five Rivers MetroParks, our community, and the thousands of Ohioans who rely on local parks every day, I respectfully urge the Committee to reconsider or exempt park districts from HB 309. **Five Rivers MetroParks must respectfully oppose House Bill 309 as presented.** Protecting the trust between voters and their local governments is the cornerstone of responsible governance.

Thank you for your time and for your continued commitment to conservative, responsible governance and our Ohio communities.