



**Interested Party Testimony Submitted to the Ohio
House State and Local Government Committee on
House Bill 130**

June 10, 2015

**Greg R. Lawson, Statehouse Liaison
The Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions**

Thank you Chairman Maag, Vice Chair Kunze, and Ranking Member Gerberry for the opportunity to testify before the Ohio House State Government Committee. My name is Greg R. Lawson. I am the Statehouse Liaison at The Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions.

I am here with a few brief remarks regarding House Bill 130, the DataOhio Project. In 2013, I had the privilege of testifying about “DataOhio” and the need for government transparency, and I appreciate the chance to revisit the issue and extend upon those remarks today.

The Buckeye Institute has long championed a more transparent government and making it easier for taxpayers to see and understand how Columbus spends their hard-earned money. Such transparency helps citizens better understand what their government has done, what it is doing, and what remains to be done with their tax dollars. Fiscal transparency helps keep government accountable to the citizenry, fosters a more informed public, and facilitates a better dialogue between the people and their elected representatives.

A website run by the state’s Department of Administrative Services has taken a reasonable first step toward fiscal transparency, but too much of the website’s data is contained in a non-searchable format that makes it difficult for taxpayers to use and navigate. More can and should be done.

Recognizing the need for and challenges of providing more fiscal transparency, The Buckeye Institute developed its own searchable database for tracking state spending on salaries for state employees, K-12 teachers, 4-year Higher Education, and select local government employees. Since the database went live in April 2010, it has been searched over 12.7 million times. Of course, “imitation is the sincerest form of flattery,” and The Buckeye Institute’s database proved so popular and useful that other private sector organizations and even Ohio’s Treasurer of State now offer similar services.

Despite its popularity and usefulness, The Buckeye Institute’s database is not a comprehensive tool. For example, it does not publish information on vendor payments

made by state agencies, or monitor the overall indebtedness of the state or its localities, and the component that lists local government salaries remains quite limited. There is certainly room for improvement. A user-friendly, searchable database that comprehensively tracks all checks issued by all state agencies to all vendors would provide a powerful upgrade to the tools currently offered by the state, The Buckeye Institute, and other organizations.

Unfortunately, Ohio historically trailed other states in this regard. The Office of the Comptroller in Texas, for instance, already provides a more sophisticated, user-friendly database available at www.texasransparency.org. More states are adding these capabilities to their government websites and databases, and although the quality and ease-of-use may vary from state to state, the desire for fiscal transparency has consistent and growing support nationwide.

Some have suggested exempting local governments from the transparency initiatives of the DataOhio Project. The Buckeye Institute understands the rationale for such an exemption, but believes that it would be a mistake. Ohio boasts thousands of local governmental bodies and a labyrinth of taxing authorities. As The Buckeye Institute outlined several years ago:

“As of October 2007, Ohio ranked seventh among states regarding the number of local governmental entities and taxing authorities according to the U.S. Census Bureau, with a staggering 3,702 entities. On average there are over 41 taxing authorities per county, which is 46 percent more than the national average of twenty-eight.

Ohio had the sixth highest number of municipalities (938) and townships (1,308). There are 614 school districts as well as a myriad of law enforcement and safety entities along with special district governments. Cuyahoga County alone has 104 local government entities.”¹

¹ Greg R. Lawson, “Joining Forces: Consolidation Will Help Ohio’s Local Governments if Compensation Package Costs are Properly Managed,” The Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions, at <http://www.buckeyeinstitute.org/uploads/files/10-31-11-Rethinking-Ohios-Government-Structure-Final%20for%20Release.pdf> (December 6, 2013).

Increasing transparency for local entities is just as important as it is for state spending, especially considering the ongoing debates before the General Assembly regarding the adequacy of local government resources. Without fiscal transparency for both state and local government, taxpayers will remain in the dark without ready access to vital information needed for holding all levels of their government accountable.

Accordingly, The Buckeye Institute applauds recent efforts of Treasurer Josh Mandel to obtain data and reach out to local communities as part of his office's Ohio Checkbook initiative. Increasing government's fiscal transparency is an important public service that can and should be provided at every level and by all our public servants. Ohio Checkbook and DataOhio can be important, complementary tools working toward that common goal, and Ohio's taxpayers deserve them.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to answering any questions from the committee at this time.