



**Proponent Testimony of Ohio Environmental Council Action Fund
House Bill 55 (As Introduced)
Presented to the Ohio House of Representatives
Government Oversight Committee
March 25, 2021**

Chairman Wilkin, Ranking Member Sweeney, and Members of the Ohio House Government Oversight Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill (HB) 55. My name is Trent Dougherty, General Counsel for the Ohio Environmental Council Action Fund (OECAF).

The coronavirus pandemic has brutally impacted all of our lives for the past year. We have lost loved ones and livelihoods. We have missed being with family and friends for births, birthdays, and funerals. COVID-19 has further exacerbated the existing obstacles everyday Ohioans encounter when they want to have dialogue with their elected state officials. Poor health and safety protocols at the Statehouse, travel shutdowns, and rational fear of contracting a disease that has killed hundreds of thousands in this country have all kept many Ohioans from coming to the statehouse to testify on bills important to them (and to their neighbors).

However, with proper safety protocols and accommodations (including utilizing processes and technology foreign to us just a year ago) Ohioans were able to conduct business, educate our children, and even hold a Presidential election. Local governments have been utilizing virtual sessions and virtual testimony throughout the pandemic with little negative impact on the conduct of the people's business amidst rising levels of public participation. In state government, the Public Utilities Commission and the Ohio Power Siting Board have conducted week long hearings with multiple parties and witnesses utilizing virtual hearings to great success. The Ohio Supreme Court has for months held virtual oral arguments where the Justices were able to ask questions of the parties and conduct hearings to decide important issues of state law.

The Ohio General Assembly must follow suit and allow virtual testimony.

Virtual testimony would provide both short and long-term benefits: mitigating the spread of COVID-19 ensuring safe and equitable access to the legislative process regardless of whether you have the time, resources, or ability to testify in-person. Our democracy is best when there are opportunities available to all citizens to speak directly to the state's decision-makers.

Further, it only benefits you, the decision-makers, to be able to seek clarity on the points your constituents make in support or opposition to legislation.

This bill is drafted to only cover the remaining life of the state of emergency order, Executive Order 2020-01D, issued on March 9, 2020. Under these emergency conditions, such an accommodation makes sense for community health. Nevertheless, there are many lessons we can learn from this tragedy. Even before the pandemic, the Ohio Statehouse and state legislative proceedings were not very accessible to the general public.

While to many of us lobbyists, the Statehouse is like a second home, to most Ohioans, the “People’s House” is a foreign and sometimes intimidating place. Whether they need to take off work, find someone to care for a loved one, drive long distances, pay to park, navigate an unfamiliar building, know where to readily access dates, times, and locations of hearings and how to properly submit testimony, participating in state legislative activity in-person can be a cumbersome and confusing process to most people.

The success and lessons learned from quickly passing and implementing HB 55 can be used to develop mechanisms where Ohioans throughout the state can have a dialogue before committees like this one. If done right, we may be able to have opportunities for your constituents to engage in the committee process—ensuring our laws express the will of the people.

In conclusion, Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for considering our perspective and our recommendations. We look forward to working with the House of Representatives during the upcoming weeks to craft a bill that protects Ohioans’ health and strengthens Ohio’s democracy.