

Public Utilities Committee  
Opponent Testimony, HB 118  
Submitted by  
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Episcopal Diocese of Southern Ohio

Chairman Hoops, Vice Chair Ray, Ranking Member Smith, and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for this opportunity to submit written testimony to you in opposition to HB 118. If passed, HB 118 will impede rural economic development. The bill creates an unnecessary new layer of review that would empower a few opponents to deprive rural landowners, counties, and school districts of decades of reliable annual revenue from utility-scale renewable power generation. It shows Ohio as being opposed to energy options increasingly embraced by American corporations. It creates the risk of an additional roadblock that will deter infrastructure investment in Ohio.

I have spent my career in the Episcopal Diocese of Southern Ohio working to advance smart solutions to poverty, including economic development for rural areas. Our diocese includes and serves the southern half of the state from a little north of I-70 to the Ohio River, hence a huge swath of rural Ohio from Troy to Belmont County. I also have a degree in public health from Johns Hopkins and have been reporting as a volunteer journalist for Rotary International on smart strategies for energy policy that combine renewable power generation and economic development. Rotary International now recognizes climate change as a humanitarian crisis threatening all of its philanthropic investment, and encourages Rotarians to champion renewable energy.

The case I am making in this testimony focuses on the needless harm this bill would do to rural counties' tax base, school districts, and farming families.

Solar power is now our cheapest way to generate electricity in Ohio. Surely, after the terrible economic setbacks Ohio has experienced in the recession and the pandemic, you want to help local businesses and householders access the cheapest possible electricity. The fact that thousands of Ohio parents were laid off and struggled to keep children connected to learning this past year via the internet is another proof that lowering electric costs is essential.

Wind and solar farms strengthen rural communities by providing a steady, strong stream of annual revenue to farmers, county governments, and school districts. HB 118 would empower a small number of voters who oppose renewable energy to kill development that could do enormous good to relieve the perennial financial stress on Ohio's rural communities. For example, Ohio Citizen Action cites a solar project that would provide \$50 million to local landowners and \$55 million to local schools over its useful life. Under HB 118, with 196 residents voting in the most recent governor's election in that township, 8% of that turnout - 16 registered voters - could call for a referendum after the Power Siting Board has already reviewed and approved the solar farm. Assuming the turnout in the next election is the same,

99 voters could kill the project, depriving the whole county of a major new annual funding lifeline.

The Power Siting Board already provides an array of opportunities for local public input before approving an application, so the process in HB 118 is redundant and introduces a new risk to frighten away private sector investment in Ohio.

Just as the Great Recession did, the pandemic has exposed the enormous vulnerability of county budgets during economic crises when unemployment and the need for government services both soar. Wind and solar farms provide a constant, dependable source of property tax over two decades of useful life. These utilities are probably among the most recession-proof businesses we have.

In 2018, I visited the Hog Creek wind farm in Hardin County and heard enthusiastic testimony from a member of the county Chamber of Commerce and from a local farmer about the transformative new economic benefits created by the wind farm. The farmer said that the predictable lease payments from the turbines is a substantial help to her family farm's income and ability to stay in business. She told me that the wind farm provides \$800,000 in new annual revenue to her children's elementary school, which has used the money to substantially improve educational programs and results.

Please don't approve a bill that would put a roadblock in front of this efficient way to reduce the unconstitutional disparities between Ohio's rural and suburban school districts. Wind and solar farms can help fill a funding gap you have not yet succeeded in closing, reducing the the pressure for additional state appropriations for rural public schools.

I am sure you've seen how major corporations are increasingly adopting renewable energy to reduce their costs, as well as to show corporate social responsibility. Please do not approve HB 118: it would signal to the business community that our state is backward on smart, sustainable economic development.

I appreciate this opportunity to bring these concerns to you and to call on you to reduce costs for Ohio ratepayers. to strengthen rural economic development, and to expand rural counties' tax base and school funding. Please protect our state from energy policy that would hamstring a vibrant future for Ohio's rural communities.

Sincerely,  
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