

Testimony in Opposition to House Bill 64

Chair Hillyer, Vice Chair Mathews, Ranking Member Galonski, and members of the House Civil Justice Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide opponent testimony on House Bill 64. My name is Ira Weiss. I am a 36-year resident of Violet Township in Fairfield County and a 49-year resident of the State of Ohio. I live at 11735 Eddington Ave, Pickerington OH 43147.

I serve as Immediate Past President of the Fairfield Heritage Trail Association, First Vice President of the Fairfield County Regional Planning Commission and Vice Chair of its Active Transportation Committee. I am also a longtime member of the Community Advisory Committee of the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission. In the past, I was President of Visit Fairfield County, Vice President of Consider Biking and Vice Chair of Transit Columbus.

I am submitting testimony in opposition to House Bill 64, as it would significantly impede our communities from conducting public infrastructure improvements. As these needs continually change, our duly elected local government officials must have flexibility and authority to meet the demands of our residents.

I am deeply concerned about language in House Bill 64 that would remove recreational trails from the definition of "public use" in Ohio's eminent domain law. Trails are a critical asset to Central Ohio, both for recreational purposes and commuting, and are widely used across the region.

Therefore, please remove language out of the bill that would disallow use of eminent domain for recreational trail projects. In my opinion, they are a valid public purpose. I can agree that a bridle trail for horseback riding or a ski trail that are strictly for recreational purposes should not be developed using eminent domain. But all trails are not the same regarding recreation vs. transportation. We need better active transportation options in our area and that includes multi-use trails.

Multi-use trails are used by many citizens for a safe, non-motorized transportation option. Eminent domain is rarely used to develop them and eliminating the possibility could hamper development of a comprehensive active transportation network in our area.

Violet Township is currently working on an active transportation plan. Refugee Road is a major east-west corridor in Violet Township. It does not have any pedestrian facilities. The discussion around various planning groups in the county over the past few years is to put a sidewalk on the south side and a multi-use path on the north side. HB 64 would certainly increase the public cost of this project and could eliminate the multi-use path entirely. The Refugee Road corridor includes several shopping centers, multiple churches and six schools. I have observed people using wheelchairs on Refugee Road as they have no other options.

The Fairfield County Regional Planning Commission is also in the process of updating its active transportation plan. While the county does have some shared-use paths, bicycle lanes, and new sidewalks, there is a need to expand this network and realize the benefits of active transportation. Feedback from the public and stakeholders was clear: the active transportation network needed to be safer and more connected. This plan not only recommends alignments for new trails that connect places within the county; it recommends programs, policies, and infrastructure improvements that can elevate Fairfield County into a premier destination for active transportation. Through the recommendation of five signature trails, the plan defines how

Fairfield County can connect to places like the Ohio to Erie Trail and Hocking Hills. And connect to the County's premier tourist attraction: Buckeye Lake. Buckeye Lake is located not only in Fairfield County, but also Licking and Perry counties.

Trails are integral to a community's quality of life and offer numerous benefits to residents and visitors alike. They provide space for health and wellness activities, and are a key component in our transportation network, connecting neighborhoods to jobs, schools, health care, retail, and greenspace. Residents also like them. In a statewide survey conducted by the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, over 82 percent of respondents indicated trails are "extremely important" or "very important" to their daily lives. When asked what prevents them from using trails, 42 percent of respondents answered that there are not enough trails, and 35 percent said trails are too far away. This survey reaffirms what we already hear from our residents: trails and greenways are a resource people value. Restricting our ability to expand and enhance them will only hinder us from improving the overall quality of life for our community.

We also recognize that trails are just one part of a robust transportation network, and as transportation needs evolve in any community, local governments must be prepared to respond. New development, jobs, and housing will always bring new public service challenges and greater transportation needs. As I previously stated, while local governments and park districts rarely use eminent domain for trails, it is a necessary tool of last resort when making significant investments in complex networks. House Bill 64 would eliminate this option and make it more difficult to fill gaps in regional trails, such as the Central Ohio Greenways network and recommendations that come from the Fairfield County and Violet Township plans.

Chair Hillyer and members of the House Civil Justice Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to submit opponent testimony on House Bill 64. We strongly urge you to reject these measures and protect our ability to meet constituent needs. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at iraweiss@hotmail.com.