

Chair Mathews, Vice Chair King, Ranking Member Lightbody, and members of the House Pensions Committee, please accept my testimony in support of HB 94. Passage of this bill will make it possible for me and others in similar situations to retire after decades of public service to our respective communities.

I began in the fire service as a volunteer firefighter in 1991 while still in college pursuing my Bachelor of Arts degree. Unlike some, I did not grow up with dreams of becoming a firefighter and did not plan on making it a career. I quickly developed a passion for fire and EMS, however, continuing to volunteer even while working in the private sector.

In 2003, I accepted a full-time position as a Captain with my department, Central Fire District in Wayne County and began paying into the Ohio Police & Fire Pension Fund. In 2006, I was appointed the first full-time Fire Chief for Seville-Guilford Fire & EMS in Medina County, a position I held for over 11 years.

In the fall of 2017, I felt called to run for elected office as a Township Trustee in Guilford Township. Knowing that I could not be a trustee for the same township for which I was employed, I called to the Ohio Public Employee Retirement System (OPERS) to ensure that I could roll my Ohio Police & Fire Pension (OP&F) service credit into their system. I was assured that it could be rolled over into OPERS at a one-to-one ration. In other words, all service credit from OP&F would be counted in OPERS.

Armed with that information and with a continued desire to serve my community and make a difference, I ran for trustee, was elected, and left the full-time fire service on December 31, 2017, with 14.7 years of service credit. As of January 1, 2018, I took office as a trustee and began earning credit in OPERS as an elected official.

Still having a passion for the fire service, in May 2020 I returned to work as a full-time Fire Chief for the Lafayette Township Fire District, also in Medina County. The job description for this position is administrative in nature and does not qualify for the OP&F pension system, so it also pays into OPERS. At this point in my public service career, I have 14.7 years of service credit in OP&F and am approaching 6 years in OPERS.

Unfortunately, the information I received in 2017, though technically correct, was limited and did not account for the requirement that the pension with fewer years must be rolled into the pension with greater years, as the law currently reads. Further, I am not able to roll the OPERS into OP&F due to the requirement that one must be a contributing member of OP&F, which is not permitted by my job description.

In practical terms, what this means to me is that the only way I can actually draw retirement from the pension plans into which I have paid for the past two decades would be to continue working for an additional 10 years until the OPERS service credit exceeds the amount of service credit in OP&F, making it possible to roll them together.

While I love my job and am passionate about serving my community, I am approaching 56 years-old and the stark reality is that nearly 33 years in the fire service has taken its toll on my body. Though my position is primarily administrative, I am still required to respond to calls, lift patients, perform CPR, extricate victims, deploy fire hose, and many other of the physical duties of a firefighter/paramedic. Frankly, I don't know that my body will allow me to continue doing these things for another decade.

Passage of HB 94 will clear a path for me to actually qualify for retirement benefits sooner than the currently required 10 additional years through OPERS by rolling my OP&F credit into their system. Considering that the employer contribution is over 70% higher (24% vs 14%) for OP&F, it just makes sense. Due to the DROP program, the overwhelming majority of contributing members to OP&F will continue in that pension system to full retirement age and beyond. For the comparatively few who are in situations like mine, however, passage of HB 94 is critical to our ability to retire with benefits we have earned through decades of public service. I respectfully request your support in passing this bill. Thank you for your consideration.

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Trustee, Guilford Township