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March 14, 2023

Ohio House Ways and Means Committee
Opponent Testimony re: House Bill 1

Chairman Roemer, Vice Chair Merrin, Ranking Member Troy, and members of the House Ways and Means Committee, my name is Brian Zimmerman, and I am the Chief Executive Officer of Cleveland Metroparks. Thank you for the opportunity today to submit written testimony in opposition to House Bill 1. The passage of House Bill 1 would have an immediate and devastating impact on Cleveland Metroparks and the services we provide to millions each year.

Our regional park system protects nearly 25,000 acres across 18 park reservations and 49 distinct communities in Northeast Ohio. We provide crucial services to every community in the region, connecting more than 19 million people annually to our parks, educational and recreational programs, golf courses, Cleveland Metroparks Zoo and Lake Erie. The Park District is not only essential for public health and wellness but is a major contributor to the regional economy. According to a study by The Trust for Public Land, Cleveland Metroparks collectively contributes \$873 million in economic value by enhancing property values, reducing stormwater runoff, filtering pollutants from the air, attracting visitors, providing recreational opportunities for residents, contributing to the multimodal transportation network, improving community health, and boosting economic development. Cleveland Metroparks is also a point of pride for our region, having been named the “Best in Nation” among park systems, and is a significant factor in improving the quality of life for all in the region.

If passed (without the application of House Bill 920) House Bill 1 would:

- Reduce the \$873 million in economic value provided by Cleveland Metroparks to Northeast Ohio and its residents;
- Cut Cleveland Metroparks property tax revenue by 10%—\$90 million over ten years—putting Cleveland Metroparks in an immediate deficit and exhausting all available reserves as soon as 2026;
- Necessitate devastating cuts to staff;
- Require reductions to services and safety across park reservations, golf courses and Cleveland Metroparks Zoo, including services such as free entrance to the Zoo on Mondays;
- Cut programs that educate thousands of students, families, seniors and local groups;
- Result in elimination of and major adjustments to planned capital maintenance, repair and improvement projects including future neighborhood trail connections, parks and exhibits at Cleveland Metroparks Zoo; and

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- Prohibit opportunities to acquire, protect and improve park land in communities including underserved communities on Cleveland's East Side. For instance, projects like the recently publicized partnerships that will add Gordon Park and Forest Hill Park to Cleveland Metroparks would be stalled or eliminated, limiting access to the lakefront and leaving already underserved communities with even less outdoor recreation opportunity.

If House Bill 920 does apply, Cleveland Metroparks would still lose approximately \$1.5 to \$2 million dollars of revenue over the next ten years, but the remaining \$88 million dollars of revenue impact caused by the decrease in taxable value to 31.5% would be paid for by increased property taxes for every Cuyahoga County and Hinckley Township homeowner (without their consent or vote).

Cleveland Metroparks operates on a 10-year levy cycle with an extensive master planning process to ensure equitable, efficient investment across every community it serves. Cleveland Metroparks just passed its 10-year levy in November 2022, with detailed planning around how the funds expected from that levy would be spent. The voters of Cuyahoga County and Hinckley Township approved that 10-year replacement levy with 77% voter approval, the highest approval rating of a county-wide ballot in the history of Cuyahoga County. If passed, House Bill 1 would deplete critical funding that Cleveland Metroparks has relied on, planned in detail for the next 10 years, and thoughtfully stewarded for over 100 years. And it would do so by effectively voiding the votes of nearly 300,000 taxpayers in Northeast Ohio that approved their investment into Cleveland Metroparks.

This bill takes away the people's voice and vote on local issues that impact them the most.

Thank you again for the opportunity.

Sincerely,



Brian M. Zimmerman
Chief Executive Officer