

Witnesses Urge Continuation of Brownfields Funding in Agriculture Subcommittee Hearing

Many of the 21 witnesses who testified Tuesday before the House Finance Agriculture, Development and Natural Resources Subcommittee urged continued funding of the brownfields program at a \$500 million level.

Jason Warner of the Greater Ohio Policy Center touted the success of the program in the current biennium with the assessment and cleanup of brownfields and the demolition of dilapidated commercial and residential buildings in 87 of Ohio's 88 counties.

However, he noted, 125 projects were granted assessment dollars in the current biennium but "without additional funding, these 125 projects will likely remain contaminated and unable to move into productive economic engines."

Amy Hamrick, director of the Richland County Land Bank, also praised the brownfield program, highlighting for the subcommittee what those dollars have meant for her community, which included cleaning up the "concrete jungle" of the former Westinghouse site as well as the demolition of an abandoned pool, two residential properties and a school. She, too, urged legislators to fund the programs in FY24-25.

Tom Mignery of Burgess & Niple Brownfield Program stressed not just the economic impacts of cleaning up brownfield sites but also noted what it means for neighborhoods when an area is cleared of potential toxins.

Asked by Subcommittee Chair Rep. Don Jones (R-Freeport) whether the state would ever get to the bottom of this "brown" hole, Mignery said there are many sites out there. However, Ranking Member Rep. Dan Troy (D-Willowick) commented that there are efforts to hold responsible parties accountable in these instances as well.

NAIOP of Ohio included brownfield remediation funding among its list of amendments for the FY24-25 budget. Other items, according to board member Chris Knezevic, are \$250 million for the building demolition and site revitalization program; \$200 million/year for the transformational mixed-use development (TMUD) program; an increase of \$50 million in FY25 for the Opportunity Zone Tax Credit Program; and updating requirements for modernizing the system of recording instruments for real estate transactions, among others.

Other concerns raised by witnesses involve the transfer of funds from the Oil and Gas Well Fund programs to other uses at the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR). Rebecca Mellino of the Nature Conservancy of Ohio told the subcommittee, "We encourage investments for plugging orphaned wells to remain whole as this

significant issue in Ohio will need long term support to be fully addressed. Sustainable funding beyond a federal appropriation through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act is critical to address the 19,000-plus orphaned wells currently identified by ODNR. Funding levels should remain consistent with the previous biennium, given the statewide demand for the efficient and effective use of these monies.”

The Ohio Conservation Federation’s Matt Misicka was asked by Troy whether his group was concerned about the oil and gas funds, and he said there were concerns but also assurances that the money would be coming back. He said it is an issue of balancing concerns with opportunity.

One of the day’s final witnesses was Ann Aquillo of the Ohio Manufacturers’ Association (OMA), who expressed support for a variety of budget provisions including the Industry Sector Partnership (ISP) Grants, TechCred funding, All Ohio Future Fund and the Career Tech Equipment program. However, “to fully complement” those programs, she went on to request the subcommittee amend the bill to include the Smart Technology Assistance Program (STAP), which “would create competitive manufacturing grants that would encourage manufacturers to invest in equipment to modernize and innovate production processes, thereby providing yet another competitive advantage for Ohio.” To be capped at \$75,000/applicant, the program would require a 1-to-1 match.

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