

**Ohio House Local Government Committee
Opponent Testimony – House Bill 137
Pamela Hickson-Stevenson, Executive Director
October 13, 2025**

Chair King, Vice Chair Kishman, Ranking Member Sims, and members of the House Local Government Committee, my name is Pam Hickson-Stevenson, Executive Director of the Akron-Summit County Public Library. Thank you for the opportunity to provide opponent testimony regarding House Bill 137.

I am here today not only on behalf of Ohio's public libraries but also on behalf of the thousands of Ohioans who rely on their public libraries every day for access to information, education, technology, and community.

House Bill 137 proposes a fundamental shift in the relationship between public libraries and the people they serve. By granting taxing authorities the discretion to deny a library board's request to place a levy on the ballot, this bill effectively removes the decision-making power from the voters and places it solely in the hands of a political body that may or may not reflect the will or needs of the community.

I want to be clear that this is not about whether a levy should pass or fail. This is about whether the public should have the right and individual liberty to decide.

We oppose HB 137 because it undermines local democracy. Ohioans have consistently demonstrated their support for public libraries. In the May 2025 primary alone, voters approved 100% of library levies on the ballot, with an average approval rate of 69%. My library's request for a 1-mill bond issue to fund capital improvements passed with 65% of the vote. In 2021, my library's operating levy renewal passed with 76% of the vote, and in 2015, a renewal with an increase passed with 70% of the vote. HB 137 would allow a small group of officials to override that public support by preventing the question from even reaching the ballot.

We oppose HB 137 because it politicizes local public library funding. Libraries are nonpartisan institutions and serve everyone—regardless of age, income, political affiliation, or background. Allowing a political body to block levy requests risks turning library funding into a political bargaining chip, rather than a community-driven decision.

We oppose HB 137 because it threatens essential services. Many libraries in Ohio rely heavily on local levies for their operating budgets. My library's local operating levy provides slightly more than 50% of our revenue. Without the ability to even ask voters for support, libraries may be forced to reduce hours, cut staff, eliminate programs, or close branches. This would disproportionately impact rural, low-income, and underserved communities.

We oppose HB 137 because it disregards accountability and transparency. Library trustees are required to demonstrate need, undergo public scrutiny, and follow a process before requesting a levy. I am unaware of any public library Board of Trustees deciding to go on the ballot without serious consideration of the ramifications to the community and the needs of the library. Library trustees take their responsibilities very seriously and must weigh multiple factors when making a decision to go on the ballot. Additionally, library trustees and administrators regularly review financial reports, strategic plans, and audit reports (along with other measures of library activity and service to the public). They are in the best position to determine when to go on the ballot and for how much. Voters then have the final say. Library trustees are dedicated public servants who always strive for transparency and accountability. HB 137 removes that transparency and accountability by allowing a taxing authority to unilaterally block the process without any requirement to justify their decision to the public.

We oppose HB 137 because it would allow taxing authorities to make decisions for citizens they do not represent. The Akron-Summit County Public Library's taxing district is defined by school district boundaries. In Summit County, parts of both the Mogadore Local and the Tallmadge City School Districts extend into Portage County. If HB 137 were enacted, the Summit County Council could make decisions that would deny residents of Portage County the opportunity to support their library.

Ohio's public libraries are among the most used and trusted institutions in our state because of their deep commitment to serving their communities. They are engines of literacy, workforce development, digital access, and civic engagement. The people of Ohio have shown repeatedly that they value their libraries and are willing to support them at the ballot box. House Bill 137 would silence those voices.

I respectfully urge this committee to reject HB 137 and preserve the right of Ohioans to decide for themselves whether to invest in their public libraries.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions.