



Protecting nature. Preserving life.

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April 25, 2016

The Honorable Kris Jordan
Chair, Sunset Review Committee
Room 039 Senate Building
Columbus, OH 43215

Dear Senator Jordan:

The Nature Conservancy is a non-partisan, science-based organization that seeks to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. Established in Ohio in 1959, we work collaboratively with businesses, farmers, sportsmen groups, government and local communities to develop pragmatic, market-based solutions to conservation challenges. More than 55,000 Ohioans are Nature Conservancy supporters.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide comments for consideration by the Sunset Review Committee regarding the Ohio Department of Natural Resources proposals to reduce or sunset selected boards, councils and commissions. We understand and respect the Department's desire to streamline these venues for public input and to reduce its administrative burden. At the same time, we know from firsthand experience that these boards and commissions contribute to the agency's commitment to transparency and provide a formal process for experts from among ODNR's key stakeholders to share advice and counsel. For these reasons, we suggest a middle approach below that balances the Department's desire for administrative relief with the value of public input and stakeholder engagement. We have also provided these suggestions to Director Zehringer for his consideration.

Wild, Scenic and Recreational Rivers: ODNR has proposed reducing the current 14 councils into one large council with one representative from each scenic river meeting quarterly in Columbus. This is a very significant change and raises concerns regarding travel time and availability to drive to Columbus, adequate membership representation and local interaction. Alternatively we propose consolidating the current 14 councils under the Wild, Scenic and Recreational Rivers program into four councils aligned with the four regions (Southwest, Central, Northeast and Northwest) under the Scenic Rivers program. Each council would have 10 seats, significantly reducing the total number of members from 140 to 40. We suggest that one of the quarterly meetings for each of these councils be held at ODNR's headquarters in Columbus to share ideas, best practices, successful endeavors, and allow ODNR to share updates and developments. The benefits of this approach would include greater local involvement and representation, easier access to meetings (versus the requirement to travel to Columbus four times each year), and the ability to share ideas between different regions. We would further recommend that the chairs from each of the proposed four councils be seated on the Recreation & Resources Commission.

Recreation & Resources Commission: ODNR has proposed eliminating the Recreation and Resources Commission. We propose retaining and utilizing this Commission. With active and direct participation by the Director of ODNR and other agency staff, our experience indicates that the Commission could act as an informed sounding board for the agency on key decisions, help to communicate and support

decisions made by the agency with its key stakeholders, and enhance the public perception about administrative transparency. The only changes we would propose reflect the suggestion above to seat the chairs of the four proposed Scenic Rivers councils and the recommendation below to consolidate and retain a Parks, Waterways and Natural Areas Council.

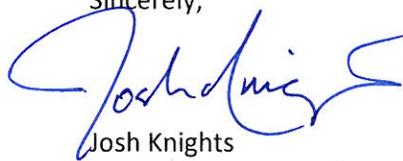
Parks, Waterways and Natural Areas Council: Rather than sunset the Parks & Recreation, Waterways Safety and Natural Areas councils, we recommend merging their functions into a single council to reflect the previous merger of the Parks & Recreation Division with the Natural Areas & Preserves Division as well as the proposed merger with the current Watercraft Division. To minimize the administrative burden on ODNR, we would suggest that the consolidated council be limited to 10 seats total. Importantly, the Natural Areas Council in the past played a critical role in helping ODNR staff to make decisions about new lands to dedicate as natural preserves and to provide insights into management practices. These are key functions that should be an explicit part of the charter of a consolidated council.

Coastal Resources Advisory Council: We also recommend retaining the Coastal Resources Advisory Council. Ohio's coastal areas are some of the most heavily populated areas of the state. Finding a balance between wise use and protection of our natural resources in such a highly developed area with multiple transportation channels requires meaningful public involvement.

The Nature Conservancy in Ohio believes that ODNR benefits when it has access to experts from key stakeholders and other interested parties who support its mission. We also believe citizens of Ohio desire a transparent and accessible public input process outlined in statute. We believe the goals of reducing administrative burden and providing and encouraging stakeholder participation in decisions are not mutually exclusive. As outlined above, we think that a middle ground can be found that balances the important functions that these boards and commission with the practical realities of administering them.

We appreciate the Committee's consideration of our request to modify the original proposals regarding these councils. If you have any questions about our proposal, please do not hesitate to contact me or Tracy Freeman, Director of Government Relations, at 614-717-2770.

Sincerely,



Josh Knights
Executive Director, Ohio

Cc: Representative Tim Brown, Co-Chair