

Testimony
House Finance and Appropriations
Re: the Section of Substitute HB 153
to Oppose the budget cut of the
Ohio Consumers Council

Good afternoon, Chairman Amstutz, Vice Chairman Carey and members of the committee. I'm sure or at least I hope you have read the "Accomplishments" prepared by the Ohio Consumers Council. It is amazing! That is the big picture so I would like you to know what they have done for us. I speak for the Huber Ridge Area Association which represents a 50 year old community of about 1,600 households, just south of Westerville that, 42 years ago when we bought our home, was a new thriving development. The community has prospered over 35 or so years, until the Ohio American Water, a for profit, investor-owned company bought our water rights. Since that time we have become a community fighting to survive just because of our extreme water increases. During those years and until last year, PUCO granted Ohio American Water 6 (six) increases that raised our water rates approximately 51.5 percent! There was a time that PUCO even made suggestions whereby OAW could profit. **That's consumer advocacy!** We understand that PUCO is not intended to be our advocate, but rather the commission which finds "balance" between the consumer and the utility. How can there be balance between the little guy and the big guys? As Thomas Suddes pointed out in his Dispatch commentary, which is attached and I hope you will read, PUCO has allowed Ohio utilities increases over the last 3 years that far exceed the Consumer Price Index. **That does seem to be a "tilted" advocacy!**

However, in 2010, the scene became different. **OCC assisted us in learning the ways of change!** We were able to bring more than 630 people to hearings; we filed more than 200 letters with PUCO; leaders from 18 cities, townships and villages signed resolutions and wrote letters to oppose OAW's rate increases. Legislators heard our cry and filed legislation to our benefit. (HB 344, SB 228). PUCO heard the cry and did more in-depth review of the case and found financial misstatements, accounting inconsistencies, and more, enough to approve only a small percent of the request. I should explain that we still pay twice what residents of Columbus, Worthington, Dublin and Westerville pay. **However,** OAW has already warned us that this year, when they file their next rate increase request, the cost to defend last year will cost us more than \$1 million!

We need the Ohio Consumers Council. Please don't cut us off from their ability to give us of their resources!

As I scanned Sub HB 153 I noted the frequency of references to those groups of people who have access to advocacy because of their disabilities or lack of personal resources. Services for women and children, aged and ill, and various

disabilities demonstrates our recognition that those groups and many more are in need of an advocate to work in their behalf. I thought just how much they reflect our situation. Without the support of the Ohio Consumers Council we will have no advocate. If their budget is cut, they will have only enough resources to work with issues that involve the large utility companies. They will have little or none to help us!

We recognize that you will hear many hours of testimony in support of the OCC budget cut from the large utility CEOs and Lobbyists. But we trust that you will see through it and recognize the advocacy OCC provides your constituents and will oppose this non-GRF budget cut.

Thank you for your time.

Joya Neff