

SPRING 2024



Ohio Environmental Council

# green watch

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# FROM ROOT TO RISE: A REFLECTION FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR CAROL KAUFFMAN

Dear Members and Supporters,

Fifty-five years ago, the Ohio Environmental Council took root.

After the Cuyahoga River caught fire in 1969, a group of local activists banded together to demand action. They formed the OEC to advocate for a healthier environment for all who call Ohio home.

Over time, the OEC hired staff, expanded membership, and deepened relationships with partners. We secured forward-thinking policies through our persistent advocacy. We built an environmental Law Center to take legal action. We learned from our successes and our setbacks to meet the most pressing environmental challenges.

Today, our work continues. As you'll read throughout this edition of GreenWatch, the OEC advocates for solutions to tackle the root causes of climate change and environmental injustice.

We're working to end gerrymandering once and for all in Ohio. We're expanding civic engagement opportunities to amplify the voices of Ohioans. We're working at every level of government to protect our environment and help communities thrive.

This work takes all of us.

*We thank **members like you** who generously sustain our efforts. We thank **partners across the country** who strengthen our movement. And we thank our **board members** who dedicate time and talent to support the OEC.*

We're especially grateful for our board leadership.

Please join me in thanking our outgoing Board President, Rich Shank, for more than eight years of service in this role in support



of the OEC. Rich has been instrumental in the strategic growth of our organization and setting up a succession plan to support the next generation of board leadership.

We are thrilled to welcome incoming Board President, Jennifer Sconyers, who has served as an OEC board member for seven years, including one year as Board Vice President.



Jennifer is President & Founder of Abundance Leadership Consulting and brings nearly 20 years of leadership experience to the OEC.

She is joined by Alex Slaymaker (Vice President), Willie Katzin (Treasurer), Mike Shelton (Secretary), and Jeniece Brock (At-Large Member) – representing the most diverse Executive Committee in OEC's history.

From our roots, we continue to rise.

Thank you for being part of this important movement.

Warmly,  
**Carol Kauffman**  
Executive Director



# SHIFTING BOUNDARIES, SHIFTING POWER: WHY CITIZENS – NOT POLITICIANS – SHOULD CALL THE SHOTS ON REDISTRICTING TO SHAPE OHIO'S ENVIRONMENTAL FUTURE



**SPENCER DIRRIG**

Managing Director of Democracy Policy

As Ohioans like you advocate for ways to solve the climate crisis, one solution holds surprising power in amplifying your community's voices: fair congressional and state legislative districts.

Gerrymandering, the manipulation of voting district boundaries by lawmakers for political gain, has long undermined the ability of Ohioans to use their power at the polls. When politicians purposefully draw districts to dilute the voting power of environmental advocates, community concerns can be sidelined.

But right now, **Ohioans have the power to create a future where citizens draw district maps for our politicians** – not the other way around. To do this, though, we must gather enough signatures by July 3, 2024, in order to put the Citizens Not Politicians ballot initiative in front of voters in the November 2024 election.

The **Citizens Not Politicians** ballot initiative would eliminate the state's politician-dominated commission for drawing state and federal legislative districts.

## SPECIFICALLY, THE AMENDMENT WILL:

- Create a 15-member Ohio Citizens Redistricting Commission made up of Republican, Democratic and Independent citizens who broadly represent the different geographic areas and demographics of the state.
- Ban current or former politicians, political party officials, lobbyists, and large political donors from sitting on the commission.
- Require fair and impartial districts by making it unconstitutional to draw voting districts that discriminate against or favor any political party or individual politician.
- Require the commission to operate under an open and independent process.



*In March, Political Associate Riley Dean and Executive Director Carol Kauffman attended a Citizens Not Politicians campaign event during the 2024 Arnold Sports Festival in Columbus.*

**"RIGHT NOW, OHIOANS HAVE THE POWER TO CREATE A FUTURE WHERE CITIZENS DRAW DISTRICT MAPS FOR OUR POLITICIANS – NOT THE OTHER WAY AROUND."**

All Ohioans deserve a healthy environment and that starts with ensuring a fair and functioning democracy.

By creating boundaries that reflect the genuine distribution of our communities, people with shared environmental concerns have more direct power to elect representatives who truly care about their community's unique needs.

While fair districts are a crucial tool, their impact extends beyond just elections. Fair districts help build the collective power of Ohio's environmental movement.



Join our **Democracy & Action Taker Team** and become a Citizens Not Politicians Signature Gathering volunteer at [bit.ly/OEC-democracy-environment-team](https://bit.ly/OEC-democracy-environment-team) or by scanning the QR code.

# LOWER BILLS, CLEANER ENERGY: HOW THE OEC ADVOCATES FOR AND WITH YOU



**KARIN NORDSTROM**  
Clean Energy Attorney

News about Ohio energy policy can make you feel dizzy: At the same time Ohioans are feeling the pinch of increasing utility bills, we're still on the hook for coal bailouts as a result of the House Bill 6 utility corruption scandal.

Ohioans deserve access to affordable and clean energy, and to have a say in how those decisions are made. That's why the OEC's Energy Program – in collaboration with our Law Center, which you can learn more about on page 10 – joins cases at the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO).

*Check out our recent work to advocate for equitable, transparent, and pro-environment utility practices:*



## FIGHTING FOR ENERGY AFFORDABILITY

Last year, we joined a case where AEP Ohio asked the PUCO to **raise rates more than 13% over 6 years**.

**As a result of our advocacy, the PUCO dropped the rate increase to only 4.5% over 4 years**, increased support for low-income households, and initiated new energy efficiency programs.



## FIGHTING AGAINST FIXED CHARGES

Also last year, the OEC spoke out when the PUCO approved an increase in Columbia Gas's monthly fixed charge – **a fee you pay before using any gas at all** – to \$58 per month by 2027 and gutted its energy efficiency programs.

More than 350 OEC members like you submitted public comments opposing this decision as it could significantly burden Ohio families. **Because of your advocacy, the PUCO has now agreed to review** whether it should overturn its decision.



## FIGHTING FOR REFUNDS FROM CORRUPT BAILOUTS

The OEC is active in the PUCO's audit of Ohio Valley Electric Corporation (OVEC) – **the company owning two coal plants Ohio lawmakers bailed out via House Bill 6**. If, in its review, the PUCO finds bailout charges from any Ohio utility were unreasonable, they can order those companies to **refund customers' payments**.

As an intervenor, the OEC presented testimony from Nick Nolan, a local dairy farmer working and living near an OVEC plant, highlighting the need for the PUCO to hold OVEC accountable. In addition to refunds, **the OEC is pushing for changes to utility operations to save Ohioans money**. PUCO is currently deciding whether it will require any refunds to customers.

Subscribe to our newsletter to stay in-the-know on the OEC's latest energy justice advocacy by scanning the QR code, or by visiting our website at [bit.ly/oecsignup](http://bit.ly/oecsignup)



# CRITICAL COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS



**CHRIS COLÓN**  
Northeast Ohio Regional Director

**AS A LIFELONG  
RESIDENT OF THE  
MAHONING VALLEY,  
I AM CONNECTED  
TO ITS HISTORY.**



*On behalf of the OEC Action Fund, Chris Colón, Northeast Ohio Regional Director, speaks at the December 2023 Youngstown City Council meeting in support of their moratorium, or pause, on SOBE's expansion.  
Credit: Sarah Lowry of the Community Foundation of the Mahoning Valley*

Unfortunately, that includes historic environmental injustices that hurt these communities. Having grown up in Youngstown, I still experience pollution caused by steel mills and local industry to this day. I witnessed extractive out-of-town businesses exploiting our natural resources. And I saw firsthand the impacts of the train derailment and unnecessary toxic chemical burnoff in nearby East Palestine.

Without a doubt, our region has been hit hard. Despite this, my connections with community members, elected leaders, and Ohio Environmental Council colleagues creates space to envision — and work toward — a healthier future. Our recent work in Youngstown demonstrates the **importance of cultivating these connections for good.**



*SOBE Thermal Energy Systems, LLC is located in downtown Youngstown, Ohio.*

In early 2022, SOBE Thermal Energy Systems announced it would expand operations at its gas-fired steam plant with unproven advanced gasification technology to provide more capacity for Youngstown customers. Immediately, local residents formed SOBE Concerned Citizens and voiced their worries about burning tires, plastic, and e-waste in their backyard. Hearing these concerns, I alerted OEC's policy and legal experts. Ultimately, we determined this technology would produce more greenhouse gas emissions and pose significant public health uncertainties for the surrounding community.

As a result, I connected the OEC with the community to advocate against SOBE. We amplified concerned resident voices and provided science-backed testimony to inform decision-makers. And in December 2023, Youngstown City Council passed legislation that established a year-long pause on the plant's proposed future operations.

Your support of OEC's Field Advocacy program is critical to our ongoing efforts to protect our health and environment in Youngstown and communities throughout Ohio.

*WHILE OUR WORK TO STOP SOBE IS NOT YET DONE, WE WILL **CONTINUE TO MAKE PROGRESS** FOR OUR COMMUNITIES WHEN WE **CONNECT, WORK, AND ADVOCATE TOGETHER.***

# INVESTING IN OHIO

## HOW THE INFLATION REDUCTION ACT AND BIPARTISAN INFRASTRUCTURE LAW ARE CREATING A HEALTHIER ENVIRONMENT FOR ALL WHO CALL OHIO HOME



**CASSIE JOHNSON**

Communications Associate

The Inflation Reduction Act and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law are **historic investments in climate action**, but what does that really mean?

Embracing these investments means we can lower our home energy costs, upgrade our aging utility infrastructure, and ensure our communities are resilient to the impacts of climate change. Moreover, putting these funds to work across Ohio will support good-paying jobs while improving air and water quality. We at the OEC have been hard at work advocating for the state of Ohio and local leaders to apply for and equitably implement these funds.

*So, imagine with me what our future could look like as we put these investments to work.*

### Weathering the Storm: Why Grid Resilience is Key to a Reliable Future

Through these federal investments, the Biden Administration is funding at least \$14 million in improvements to the resilience of our energy grid through a grant to the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio. The OEC has been active at the PUCO on this issue, offering comments and recommendations on best ways to implement federal funding for grid resiliency. By incentivizing improvements to our aging electrical infrastructure alongside energy efficiency improvements and renewable energy

production, Ohio communities will be able to better withstand the growing number of severe weather events caused by climate change.

In June 2022, our current energy grid failed 230,000 AEP Ohio customers in Central Ohio during one of these severe weather events, resulting in dangerously hot conditions for primarily Black, brown, and low-income communities. While the 2022 outage was an extreme case, it's a scenario that happens frequently across our state. But we have the opportunity to create a more resilient climate future. By equitably stewarding the federal dollars coming to Ohio, **we can create an energy grid that works for everyone – no matter where you live or what company provides your electricity.**

### Incentivizing Individuals: Ensuring Ohio Families can Access Clean Energy

And, let's be clear: federal funding is not just for cities and utility providers – **this money is for Ohioans like you, too!** Increased development of rooftop and community solar will decrease residents' reliance on investor-owned electric utilities to keep your lights on and your refrigerator running. **Individual tax credits and rebates through the Inflation Reduction Act will help your household to purchase energy efficient appliances and pay for repairs to decrease your energy consumption.**

In today's economy, bold climate action like this that makes *energy more affordable for Ohioans and better for our environment* is a major win for everyone.



# OUR CLIMATE FUTURE

## INFRASTRUCTURE LAW ARE SUPPORTING

### Bridging the Gap: Funding Solutions for Universal Access to Safe Water

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law provides \$603 million in funding to replace Ohio's lead service lines, ensuring all Ohioans have access to clean, safe drinking water. By empowering local governments to directly steward funding, Ohio's local leaders can upgrade our drinking water systems to residents without bearing the costs – or passing them on to consumers like you.

While most of us know about the lead contamination in the tap water of Flint, Michigan, few realize lead water lines are a major problem here in Ohio. Currently, there are an estimated 650,000 lead service lines throughout Ohio – more than almost any other state in the nation. Exposure to lead, even at low levels, can cause serious health effects in all age groups, but especially for children. **Once lead pipes are replaced, Ohioans will no longer have to worry about lead-contaminated drinking water.**

These are just a few examples of *many ways unprecedented federal investments are supporting a healthier environment, a stronger economy, and a more resilient climate future across Ohio* and the nation. With the support of members like you, the OEC continues to advocate and work with partners to ensure those investments are making an impact in communities across Ohio.



Looking for information about how to make the most of federal investments to support a healthier environment in your home or community? Learn more by scanning the QR code, or visiting [bit.ly/OEC-federalclimateinvestments](https://bit.ly/OEC-federalclimateinvestments)



## CLIMATE ACTION PLANNING

Many municipalities across Ohio have already developed climate action plans, outlining the steps their cities will take to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The State of Ohio has never developed a plan until now. After securing a \$3 million Climate Pollution Reduction Grant, the Ohio EPA submitted its first Priority Resilience Plan which details the major sources of emissions in Ohio and identifies the primary emission reduction measures that the state will focus on in the near-term. **The OEC proudly supported the state in developing its plan,** joined the plan as a partner for future outreach, and stands ready to support future efforts including the development of a Comprehensive Resiliency Plan in 2025.

## LEVERAGING PRIVATE INVESTMENT

According to a February report by Climate Power analyzing public announcements from the private sector, new clean energy projects have already spurred \$8.8 billion in investment and supported over 8,612 good-paying clean energy jobs in the state.

## ADVANCING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Importantly, the Biden-Harris Administration made a commitment early in their administration to ensure 40 percent of the overall benefits of key federal investments support disadvantaged communities that have been underinvested in and overburdened by pollution. The Justice40 initiative is providing important funding for Ohio communities.

# A DAY IN THE LIFE: A WATER ADVOCATE'S EXPERIENCE ON CAPITOL HILL



**MELANIE HOUSTON**

Managing Director of Water Policy

Every March, Great Lakes enthusiasts descend on Capitol Hill to talk with Members of Congress about the importance of protecting and investing in the largest freshwater system in the entire world — our Great Lakes. *I look forward to Great Lakes Days every year because I get to join advocates across the region to fight for clean water.* Supported by the Healing our Waters Coalition, advocates collectively tell the local stories of Great Lakes restoration successes, communities in need of upgraded water systems, and the importance of climate action and environmental justice.

This year, Ohio's team of 12 Great Lakes advocates included a farmer/water scientist, community action agency leader, solar entrepreneur, urban agriculture leader, and lead-free water advocate. We were also joined by a Cuyahoga River Area of Concern advisory committee member, Lake Erie Charter Boat Association president, and the Director of the Ohio Conservation Federation.



All photos courtesy of Melanie Houston and coalition partners.

During Great Lake Days, Riley Dean, Political Associate for the OEC; Alicia Smith, Executive Director of Junction Coalition; and I helped lead our Ohio team to and from meetings on Capitol Hill with lawmakers from the Buckeye State. Together, we helped kick off conversations with aides in the offices of Senators Brown and Vance as well as nine U.S. Representatives. We don't always get to meet directly with our elected leaders, but this year, we were thrilled to meet with Congresswoman Marcy Kaptur, a strong Great Lakes champion.

In our meetings, we advocated for reauthorization of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative funding. Our coalition is urging Congress to dedicate \$500 million per year from 2027- 2031 for projects that improve the Great Lakes' water quality. While sharing the stories of our local communities, we asked lawmakers for sustained funding levels for the Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Loan Funds — targeted toward the biggest problems and the communities hardest-hit by pollution. And finally, we pressed Members of Congress to support bold, comprehensive action on climate change, including reducing harmful algal blooms worsened by increased flooding, and to strengthen the Clean Water Act.

**Our work at Great Lakes Days demonstrates the power of collaboration in driving meaningful change for the health of our waters. But our advocacy on Capitol Hill is just one step; the fight to protect our precious Great Lakes continues every day in communities across Ohio.**



Help advocate for Ohio's water resources by downloading our Advocacy Toolkit by scanning the QR code or by visiting [theoec.org/advocacy-toolkit](https://theoec.org/advocacy-toolkit)



# OHIO FORESTS

## ONE OF OUR BEST TOOLS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST CLIMATE CHANGE



**NATHAN JOHNSON**

Senior Attorney for Land & Water

Did you know that forests – especially mature forests – are crucial in the fight against climate change?

Trees naturally pull carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere to use during photosynthesis. The larger the tree, the more carbon dioxide captured or “sequestered” in leaves, wood, and soil. **Big trees are the best natural tool we have to remove carbon dioxide from our atmosphere.** Older trees can store and effectively sequester larger amounts of carbon, making mature forests among our best assets in warding off the devastating effects of climate change.

**Nearly 95% of our great state was once covered in lush, healthy, old-growth forest.** Now, due to decades of overlogging, virtually all of Ohio’s old-growth forests are gone. Today, **less than 30% of our land is forested at all** and most of our forests are *heavily fragmented* by roads, utility lines, and development. Furthermore, **only about 15% of all forest land in Ohio is public forest held by state, federal, and local governments for public benefit.** Many of these public forests are frequently threatened by heavy logging and fossil fuel extraction.

Climate is one of the many reasons why it is so important to push back when special interests aim to extract resources from Ohioans’ public lands.

In 2020 and 2021, **the OEC and partners won a federal court case that stopped about 40,000 acres of oil and gas leasing in our state’s only National Forest.** That’s nearly the same amount of land as the entire city of Akron, or two Salt Fork State Parks. But the U.S. Bureau of Land Management recently announced that it wants to try leasing that same 40,000 acres again. If leasing moves forward, parts of our public forest will be destroyed. That means the loss of carbon sequestered in trees and soils and more greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere.

The OEC is continuing the fight to keep fracking out of our National Forest. **We need strong, connected public forests that boast impressive old-growth habitat and deep carbon sequestration.** Ohio’s forests are only just beginning their recovery, and they need us to help them achieve their potential.

Our climate and our future demand no less.



Get the latest updates on OEC’s public lands advocacy in support of Ohio’s only national forest by scanning the QR code, or visiting [bit.ly/Fracking-WNF](https://bit.ly/Fracking-WNF)



# TAKING THE LEGAL ROAD



## THE OEC LAW CENTER'S FIGHT FOR OHIO'S ENVIRONMENT



CHRIS TAVENOR  
GENERAL COUNSEL

Most people are familiar with how our laws and regulations help set the standards to protect and improve the health of our environment. But when those standards are violated or weakened, legal action can help ensure justice and even drive the creation of stronger policies that prevent future injustice.

**That's what makes the OEC's legal advocacy — accomplished through our very own Law Center — all the more critical in the fight to protect the health and environment of all Ohio communities.**

For more than two decades, the William W. Ellis Ohio Environmental Council Law Center has leveraged the **power of the law** to advocate, analyze, and educate for the benefit of all Ohioans. The Law Center's expert attorneys specialize in democracy, clean energy, public lands and clean water, though they take action and provide counsel across the full range of the OEC's advocacy efforts. Our attorneys use a range of legal strategies to achieve their mission. They fight for strong environmental policies, defend existing protections, and hold polluters accountable in court.

Beyond these legal tactics, the Law Center supports law students, local communities and policymakers by providing specific resources and training — like our annual **Ohio Public Interest Environmental Law Conference** or our free legal clinics in East Palestine — to help them navigate the legal system and advocate for a safe, healthy environment.

### THE LAW CENTER'S WORK IS CRITICAL TO SECURING A CLEAN, HEALTHY OHIO.

You can help make it an unwavering voice for climate justice:



#### VISIT OUR WEBSITE

Learn more and share with your networks:  
[theoec.org/law-center](http://theoec.org/law-center)



#### SAVE THE DATE

RSVP to our Ohio Public Interest Environmental Law Conference at [theoec.org/opielc](http://theoec.org/opielc)



#### MAKE A GIFT

Support our legal advocacy at [theoec.org/donate](http://theoec.org/donate)



# HELP SUSTAIN THE OEC'S MISSION: JOIN THE OEC'S GREEN GIVING CLUB!



**BRIONES BEDELL**  
MEMBERSHIP ENGAGEMENT MANAGER

If you are reading this, you are an important part of a 55-year legacy of environmental champions fighting for a thriving Ohio. But what if there was a more direct way to power Ohio's environmental movement? **The OEC's Green Giving Club** is just that – through automated, monthly gifts, you can help provide the reliable support needed to sustain our effective, comprehensive, and respected advocacy for Ohio's environment.

But that's not all – as a Green Giving Club member, you'll receive **exciting, exclusive benefits** to reflect your special commitment to the OEC's mission!  
**Perks include:**

- The latest print copies of our **Annual Report** and **Advocacy Toolkit** delivered to your home
- **Impact Partner Reports**, which provide our most committed donors with a personalized, up-close look at the impact of their support
- **Exclusive invitations** to entertaining, educational events
- End-of-year **donation summaries** to assist in tax preparation
- Easy, **automated** monthly gift processing
- A **dedicated OEC staff member** who serves as Green Giving Club members' direct line to the organization

**To become a Green Giving Club member**, please scan the QR code, visit our website at [theoec.org/give-monthly](http://theoec.org/give-monthly), or give us a call at (614) 487-7506. *We can't wait to connect with you!*



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# GREEN GALA 2024

## CELEBRATING 55 YEARS OF ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCACY

A **special thank you** to the OEC's generous sponsors for supporting our 2024 celebration! **Reserve your tickets** for an evening at the **Franklin Park Conservatory** on **May 18 at 6:30 P.M.** by visiting:

[THEOEC.ORG/GREEN-GALA-2024](http://THEOEC.ORG/GREEN-GALA-2024)

### PRESENTER:

G. Dennis Cooke, Ph.D. & Barbara K. Andreas, Ph.D.

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Beth Crane & Richard McKee  
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### LEADERS

William Katzin, MD, PhD &  
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The OEC restricts contributions from individual businesses to less than 5% of our total operating budget and limits total business donations to less than 15%. The OEC requires all business donors to acknowledge that acceptance of a gift does not hinder or place limits on the OEC's ability to comment on, litigate, or participate in processes related to any permit, legislation, policy, or related decision.



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Ohio Environmental Council

# GREEN GALA

We invite you to join us for an inspiring evening  
as we celebrate our 55th year of advocating  
alongside passionate Ohioans like you!

*Tickets are limited.*

**Kindly RSVP by Wednesday, May 8:**

- ✦ Visiting our website at [theOEC.org/Green-Gala-2024](https://theOEC.org/Green-Gala-2024)
- ✦ Calling us at (614) 487-7506

SATURDAY, MAY 18 ✦ 6:30-9:30 P.M. ✦ THE WELLS BARN @ FRANKLIN PARK CONSERVATORY