



Geauga Public Health District (GPHD) – Special Meeting March 15, 2023

Meeting Details: The GPHD Board met in Special Session at the Geauga County Administration Building, 12611 Ravenwood Drive, Suite B303, Chardon, OH, on March 15, 2023 at 4 pm. The agenda was available online, as was the draft [Lake County General Health District Cross Jurisdictional Agreement](#), which was made available the previous afternoon. Geauga County Automated Data Processing (ADP) live streamed this meeting and a [recording is available](#). At publication, the recording had been viewed 382 times.

Board Attendance: (as seated, from L to R) here.

- Richard Piraino, President
- Dr. Ashley Jones, Pro Tem
- Lynn Roman
- Carolyn Brakey
- Dr. Mark Rood

Staff Attendance:

- Adam Litke – Administrator
- Daniel Lark, Environmental Health Director

Legal Council:

- Bryan Kostura, formerly of Flannery Georgalis and now with McDonald Hopkins.

Seated in the general public were Medical Director Dr. Jeffrey Cameron, Population Health Director Carol Straniero and Administration Director Alta Wendell.

Observer Comment: during the course of the meeting it was revealed that as part of the LCGHD Cross Jurisdictional Agreement that Mrs. Straniero, Mrs. Wendell and most of the Geauga Public Health employees, will be terminated on March 31, 2023.

Call to Order: called to order at 4:00 pm. The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Minutes: none presented

For Sale of Property Program (FSOP) Update - Mr. Kostura, the attorney representing the GPHD provided this update. He explained that GPHD terminated the FSOP program in June, 2022 with the intent to replace the program with the Ohio EPA mandated O&M Program. FSOP continues to have a large backlog and O&M is currently being implemented. Per Mr. Kostura, the Geauga

County Prosecutor is working to provide an opinion as to whether both programs can be enforced simultaneously.

He recommended transferring management of the FSOP program to the Administrator, Adam Litke, as the needs of the program are administrative in nature. This would allow the Board to focus their attention on development of the fledgling O&M program. **Reviewer Note: What this would mean in practice, or how it would differ from current practice was not explained.**

The Board approved a motion authorizing Mr. Litke to administer the FSOP program, under 3701-29-25 of the Geauga County Household Sewage Township System Regulations, by a 4-1 vote, with Dr. Jones abstaining.

HB110 Compliance Issue Update - Mr. Kostura referred to the [March 2, 2023 Special Meeting](#) where GPHD first announced the compliance issue, discovered during the 3rd quarter of 2022, with the [HB110 Program](#), a septic inspection program implemented by the State of Ohio in 1984. His firm was hired by GPHD to conduct an audit. He reported that about 800 physical files had been reviewed and were in “various states of order.” They are also examining three databases:

- Database #1 - contains activity for 2022/2023. Files are in good shape
- Database #2 - contains a voluminous number of files, many with errors
- Database #3 - contains files retrieved from GPH servers by ADP

Mr. Piraino inquired how far back in time the audit is covering and Mr. Kostura stated they are back as far as 2010. Mr. Lark added that the program is at least 25 years old.

Lake County General Health District Cross Jurisdictional Agreement: Mrs. Roman and Mrs. Brakey

Mr. Piraino thanked Mrs. Roman and Mrs. Brakey for their efforts and stated they had participated in about twenty meetings. Mrs. Roman stated they determined GPHD cannot afford to maintain an independent health district.

Observer Note: Since December 1, 2022, GPHD held 10 public meetings. As recently as the [Feb 22, 2023 regular meeting](#), Mrs. Roman and Mrs. Brakey had nothing to report regarding their weekly meetings with LCGHD.

Mrs. Brakey stated a “reset” was needed immediately in order to generate cost savings. They project a 2023 shortfall of \$35,000 and a 2024 shortfall of over \$500,000. They also are facing a levy renewal and have a fiduciary duty to minimize costs to the taxpayers while continuing to maintain services. Mrs. Brakey acknowledged they have a healthy reserve but asserted they must take action now to move forward in a fiscally responsible manner.

Observer Note: To date, no financial report or presentation has been provided in public session to support the Board’s financial assertions of a \$35,000 loss in 2023 or projected future losses in excess of \$500,000. In its [Jan 18, 2023 Observer Report](#), LWVG reported that GPHD’s certified available cash on January 1, 2023 totaled \$3,795,710.11.

Mrs. Roman described efforts by herself and Mrs. Brakey to educate themselves about their financial situation, specifically the challenges they face, opportunities, organizational structure, services, cost of services and the options that are available to them immediately. She stated they explored opportunities with numerous other local health districts and referred to a public health study that supported regional public health services. She stated further that districts with populations under 100,000 people have difficulty obtaining grants and indicated Ohio Public Health is in favor of exploring regional options. She concluded by stating they had settled on Lake County General Health District as the best partner for them.

Mrs. Brakey continued, stating they are recommending GPHD enter into a cross jurisdictional agreement with LCGHD, with LCGHD acting as a “staffing agency” for GPHD. She indicated the arrangement would allow GPHD to retain control while generating annual savings of \$350,000 to \$600,000 in costs. GPHD will maintain its vehicles, offices, website, and identity. Vital records services will remain with GPHD. She opined that Geauga residents will receive the same services and they will go to the same places for those services.

She stated Lake is ready to provide all necessary services and pointed out that Mr. Litke and Mr. Lark have been providing contract services. She noted that Lake has administered the WIC program for Geauga since 2016.

Mrs. Brakey listed the following benefits of the agreement:

- greater access to grant funds
- possible additional programs
- more efficient accreditation process
- access to specialty staff
- better emergency preparedness
- finance and grant writing
- larger pool of employees

Observer Note: At this point the recording skipped forward to public comment. We noted Mrs. Brakey appeared to deliver the same remarks during the [7PM HDAC Annual Meeting](#) and we have copied the rest of her message from that presentation below.

Per Mrs. Brakey, GPHD will issue its own permits, maintain its own bank accounts and inspections will be performed under the direction of GPHD.

She stated Lake is ready to provide all necessary services and pointed out that Mr. Litke and Mr. Lark have been providing contract services. She noted Mr. Lake has administered the WIC program for Geauga since 2016.

Mrs. Brakey stated that "...some of the changes this agreement brings are painful" before sharing that seventeen Geauga Health employees will be laid off effective March 31st. They will be informed of severance offers and may apply for employment with LCGHD.

She stated, "we face financial challenges that demand dramatic change," and went on to share that GPHD had a 2023 shortfall of \$35,000. She asserted future shortfalls would exceed \$500,000.

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Mrs. Brakey further stated the board had considered all sources of revenue including levy funds from residents, permits/fees and grants. She stated the board should consider every option before asking for a levy increase.

Observer Comment: Two assessment options are available to the Geauga Public Health District. Apportionments may be assessed to townships and municipalities composing the District through [ORC 3709.28](#) and levy funds from residents may be assessed through [ORC 3709.29](#).

Mrs. Brakey asserted, "Assessing already cash-strapped cities, townships and villages for the increased costs did not appear to be a viable and responsible decision." She went on to say fees are set by statute but grant revenues appear promising under the agreement.

Observer Comment: It is unclear how the Board determined whether a township/municipality assessment under [ORC 3709.28](#) was viable.

Mrs. Brakey explained the board did their homework and pursued several other partners before settling on Lake County. She stated the Ohio Department of Health fully supports a regional approach to public health services, then asserted they are taking "a unique approach that retains all of regionalism's benefits with none of its trappings."

Board Discussion:

Dr. Rood summarized steps taken to explore options including interviewing Administrators, seeking applications for Environmental Health Director, determining additional staff that would be required for accreditation. Mrs. Roman agreed size was a deterrent to accessing grant funds. Dr. Jones began to comment that they are prioritizing services but then the recording skipped forward.

Public Comment:

The following individuals commented. The Board had stated during this portion of the meeting that they would not immediately answer questions.

- Jonathan Tiber, Trustee for Claridon Twp inquired why the Board didn't pursue a levy when it foresaw a shortfall and asked if there would be a two county levy.
 - Shelly Lewis, President of League of Women Voters of Geauga wished everyone Happy Sunshine Week. She explained that the 1976 Government in the Sunshine Act was intended to restore faith in government processes following the Watergate scandal. She thanked the Board for permitting public comment so that she could offer criticism of the process the Board used to reach the agreement. She noted that only two individuals had negotiated this agreement and that no information had been previously shared. She urged more time for scrutiny and public input and asked the Board to table the vote until the next regular meeting.
 - Jim Mueller, Russell Twp Trustee expressed shock that a wealthy county like Geauga is losing its Health Department. He stated he was upset that we (GPHD) are in a situation where we are "crawling on our hands and knees to Lake." He expressed the opinion that more effort should be made to keep the Health Department in Geauga.
 - A resident from Munson Twp shared that she knows Lake County residents who aren't happy with their Health Department services. She questioned how Geauga will be absorbed and wants to know what's in it for Lake County.
 - Frank Gliha, candidate for Health Board expressed concern about "losing the Geauga staff we are accustomed to seeing." He noted Geauga is a rural county and questioned Lake County's ability to manage Geauga's septic and well inspection needs. He said he thinks Geauga County residents should vote on whether to do this.
 - A resident from Troy Twp inquired what the personal complaint process would be and also asked whether a terminated employee would face a union mandate if hired by Lake County.
 - Mike Brown, Trustee for Chardon Twp stated he was surprised by the timing and by the Board's plan to sign it during this special meeting. He commented that it "did not pass the smell test." He said Geauga residents value their sovereignty. He said that township trustees should have been consulted and wondered why a subdivision assessment was not considered. He concluded by referring to the agreement as a "nuclear option."
- Observer Note: Mr. Brown appears to referring to the apportionment option in [ORC 3709.28](#)**
- Chris Alusheff, Councilman for Aquilla Village described the agreement as "Lynn and Carolyn's vision." He decried the lack of transparency.
 - A Claridon Twp resident asked whether the Board envisioned Geauga returning to an independent state. She asked what Lake Health Commissioner Ron Graham pushed for and sought clarification of the termination provisions and names for each role.
 - PJ Cavanaugh, Trustee for Auburn Twp said he agreed with Mike Brown and wants to know who will make decisions under this agreement, about future subdivision assessments.
 - A Geauga resident inquired who wrote the agreement and how did the Board reach consensus. She asked why they did not hold any public forums and questioned why,

given that they have contracts through June 30, were they rushing this agreement through? She stated the Environmental Health program will generate \$700,000 in annual revenue and she supports keeping the Health Department in Geauga along with Geauga's employees.

- A Chardon Twp resident inquired whether GPHD received his letter.
- Joelle Weiss, County Registrar for GPHD inquired what will happen if Lake employees are running things and there are problems? Who will be left on the inside to resolve problems?
- A Chardon Twp resident stated the Board is "selling us out to Lake." She questioned the timing of the meeting and asked why they needed to rush.
- Jacob Sutter, Munson Twp Trustee said that under the current leadership he has seen things "fall through the cracks." He asserted the FSOP was profitable and protected his property.
- Jim McCaskey, Munson Twp Trustee stated that it feels rushed and said Munson Twp would pay the \$30,000 to support Geauga Health. He admonished GPHD for the treatment of their employees and agreed with Shelly Lewis's recommendation to table the vote.
- A GPHD employee (unable to ascertain name) spoke of the difficulty of not knowing her employment status since November. She criticized the Board and Administration for not providing updates and described how she could not commit to community events because of the uncertainty.
- Carol Straniero, Population Health Director announced she resigned the previous Friday after being informed she will not have a job after March 31st. She too lamented the lack of communication by GPHD and said she had built a great team.
- Alta Wendell, Administrative Director who is two years from retirement, said she learned yesterday that she will not have a job. She described low morale and being watched like you are some kind of criminal.
- A Geauga resident said, "we used to be considered the best."
- Ms. Sullivan, GPHD Epidemiologist said they received no prior notice and that she just learned yesterday like everyone else in the room that she is losing her job.
- Chris Toth, GPHD Clerical Specialist inquired who will be here to serve Geauga residents on March 31st after you let everyone go?

Mrs. Brakey responded to questions about why the Board didn't pursue a levy or assess the townships by stating that it wasn't necessary as they had found an opportunity to save money while maintaining services. She said they were performing their fiduciary duty and added, "Personally, I'm not a fan of propping up unneeded bureaucracy."

Mrs. Brakey stated they had been discussing this agreement in public meetings since November. This assertion was met by anger from those in the audience.

Mrs. Roman stated that Lake County is being reimbursed for employee salaries and nothing else.

Brakey/Roman continued to respond to questions. The crowd became increasingly noisy and agitated.

- Jim Mueller, Russell Twp Trustee said his community would gladly pay their share to keep the Health Department in Geauga, if they were only given the chance to do so.
- Joyce Peters, Parkman Twp Trustee said she saw what happened in similar cooperative agreements and stated "Lake County got all the money."

Mrs. Brakey asked that comments be closed and to be given a chance to answer some of the questions.

Dr. Jones explained that residents would continue to be served but by employees contracted by Lake County.

Mrs. Roman stated it is possible they would return to independent status.

Mr. Piraino acknowledged that the O&M program will generate about \$700,000 annually but said that revenue would be offset by additional costs to staff the program. No specifics were offered.

Mr. Piraino reiterated that vital services will continue to be offered in the same office and that permitting will also be in the same office but will be staffed by Lake employees. He stated that residents should not see any change in service.

The Board then spent several minutes speaking quietly with each other and were reminded that in a public meeting their discussions must be audible.

Mr. Piraino stated they were discussing whether to delay the vote. He opined it is better for the employees if they take action today instead of delaying. Mrs Roman agreed.

Mrs. Roman commented they had to address the \$500,000 shortfall and when members of the public called out to talk to HDAC she stated she would like to see all of the townships write a check and hear the voters say they will pass a levy.

- From the audience, "You should probably ask!"

Mrs. Brakey moved to enter into the cooperative agreement with LCGHD and the motion passed by roll call vote 5-0.

Meeting immediately adjourned.

Next regular meeting: March 22, 2023 at 5 pm. All meetings at Geauga County Administration Building, 12611 Ravenwood Drive, Suite B303, Chardon, OH.

More Information: <http://gphohio.org/>

Observer: Shelly Lewis

Reviewer: Gail Roussey

The League of Women Voters of Geauga is a 501(c)(3) nonpartisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy. They do not support or oppose individual candidates or parties. Learn more about the LWVG at www.lwvgeauga.org.