

Testimony on HB 203.
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vice-president, League of Women Voters of the Oberlin Area

I wish to speak specifically to Section 2917.11 which defines what it means to disturb the peace:

(E) The exercise of a constitutional or statutory right is not, in itself, a violation of this section and does not constitute reasonable, articulable suspicion of criminal activity.

This appears to apply to the "open carry" statute, enacted because there seemed to be, especially in hunting activities and in rural communities, legitimate reasons to be walking around openly with a firearm.

However what has happened since the statute was passed is that the open carry folks have since taken the freedom to 'open carry' weapons and turned it into a bullying tactic intended to intimidate those who prefer not to have guns either on their person or in their homes. We, the citizens of Oberlin, had this experience when a group of open carry advocates came to our town from distant counties, occupied our parks and essentially chased away Oberlinians who had come to those parks with their children. While the 'open carry' advocates claimed to be there to exercise their 'rights,' Oberlinians felt threatened, seeing folks "packing heat" within mere paces of their children. They felt unable to enjoy their own town. More egregiously, they felt deprived of the ability to exercise their 1st amendment rights of free speech and free assembly. Wanting to protest the gun owners' presence, they were silenced because they feared for the safety of their children. It is not a safe feeling, and OUR peace was definitely disturbed by this intrusion into our city.

Only this past week in Texas, a group of four mothers were trapped in a Starbucks coffee shop by forty open carry advocates who came into the Starbucks parking lot with a variety of guns, including semi-automatic weapons. Those mothers remained in the store, along with other innocent customers who happened to be there, for several hours before they felt safe enough to leave. Again, how was their right to assemble and speak freely protected in this situation?

While HB 203 seems to go out of its way to protect the rights of gun owners, what is the legislation doing to protect the rights of those who do not own guns? What about the rights of the unarmed individual who is confronted by someone with a gun? Clearly there is an element of unequal rights in this situation, a situation in which the unarmed citizen invariably comes to harm, the least harm being to fear for one's life, and the worst being to lose that life. Are we also not citizens who should have equal protection under Ohio's laws?

We urge you not to vote this bill out of committee until you have addressed the matter of keeping ALL Ohioans safe from harm. Thank you.