

1999 Highlights

Sandy Buchanan, Executive Director

As we launch Ohio Citizen Action's 25th year in 2000, here is a review of the organization's major accomplishments and developments in 1999. During the year, we launched a series of "good neighbor campaigns" around the state, and also had two significant victories in the legislature.

I. Pollution Prevention

A. Good Neighbor Campaigns

Ohio Citizen Action organized community pressure on local companies to prevent pollution with a series of "good neighbor campaigns" throughout the state. The major campaigns included the following:

- Cincinnati Specialties: after 18,000 letters from Southwest Ohioans and a year-long campaign by Ohio Citizen Action, the Environmental Community Organization, and coalition allies, Cincinnati Specialties agreed to make a series of major changes to its manufacturing plant. The company agreed to change its methods for chlorine storage to prevent accidents, to upgrade equipment to prevent releases of methanol to the sewers, and to work with a citizens task force to find ways to reduce odors and toxic air emissions. The Cincinnati Specialties campaign was also featured on the CBS Evening News on June 27, 1999, the date when companies across the country had to give their communities information about the potential for chemical accidents.
- Brush Wellman: Ohio Citizen Action worked with employees and neighbors of Brush Wellman's beryllium plant in Elmore to push the company to make changes. A week-long series in the Toledo Blade highlighted years of collusion between the company, the federal regulators, and state and local government which allowed the company to make beryllium in unsafe conditions, causing dozens of people to develop a fatal lung disease. In November 1999, we organized a town meeting in Elmore where people from throughout the community came forward to give evidence of their experience with this company. Because Brush-Wellman's international headquarters are in Cleveland, both Ohio Citizen Action's Cleveland and Toledo offices are working on this campaign.

- Georgia Pacific: We supported the work of the Southside Community Action Association and community residents to pressure Georgia Pacific, which has had several major chemical accidents, to give the community critical information about chemical hazards on the site, and we assisted in a local health survey.
- Marion: We worked with the Concerned River Valley Families, a local group which organized when they discovered a leukemia cluster, to push for the relocation of the high school which is built on a military dump. Working with a coalition of environmental organizations from around Ohio, we put pressure on U.S. EPA to oversee the investigation of the site, and we urged Governor Taft to reinstate a whistleblower who had been removed from his position as site coordinator for Ohio EPA.
- WTI Incinerator: Ohio Citizen Action joined with Save Our County and the Tri-State Environmental Coalition to call for the shutdown of WTI, one of the world's largest hazardous waste incinerators, which sits on the Ohio River within 1100 feet of an elementary school in E. Liverpool.
- BP America: We assisted the work of Allen County Citizens for the Environment in reaching a precedent-setting agreement with BP America for a reduction of 150,000 pounds of air pollution per year and a commitment not to route polluted water to the Ottawa River. BP also agreed to pay for independent technical assistance to the citizens to analyze pending permits at the facility.
- Cleveland Laminating and Smithers Oasis: We generated hundreds of letters to two smaller companies, Cleveland Laminating in Cleveland and Smithers Oasis in Kent, who were major air polluters, and met with the companies about changes they are making to reduce emissions.
- Envirosafe: Working with the Coalition for a Safe Environment, we uncovered information that Envirosafe, Ohio's only hazardous waste landfill, was not meeting proper standards for stabilizing steel plant waste before landfilling it. We joined in a lawsuit to oppose the disposal of this waste.
- Accident prevention: Ohio Citizen Action helped citizens question local chemical plants on their Y2K preparedness, organizing several public meetings in Columbus and providing a handbook and information for senior citizens in Cincinnati.

B. Enforcement of environmental laws

Ohio Citizen Action, working with Rivers Unlimited, the Ohio Chapter of the Sierra Club, and Ohio Public Interest Research Group, forced an unprecedented federal investigation of the enforcement record of the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency. We have petitioned the U.S. EPA to revoke Ohio's authority to enforce federal laws regulating air, water, and hazardous waste. As part of this campaign, Ohio Citizen Action is working with hundreds of activists across the state who have found that when they are battling a serious pollution problem in their neighborhoods, they too often end up battling the Ohio EPA as well. A complete record of the case to date, including the study "Hidden from the Public," which we released in August 1999, can be found on our website.

We also announced a whistleblower hotline, where people who work at individual companies or at the enforcement agencies, can call to seek help when they have witnessed violations of environmental laws.

We worked with the City of Yellow Springs to draft, and then pass a local ordinance requiring companies to involve the public when they are seeking to redevelop a brownfields hazardous waste site. The Yellow Springs ordinance, which was enacted in August, will serve as a model for other communities from throughout the state and is needed due to flaws in the state's own brownfields, or "voluntary action" hazardous waste clean-up program.

C. Clean Air

- In Cleveland, Ohio Citizen Action organized public support at a June hearing for new air pollution standards for sport utility vehicles. The standards, which will cut pollution levels for new vehicles by almost 90% beginning in 2004.

- Ohio Citizen Action, Citizens Action Coalition of Indiana and a coalition of groups from throughout the Midwest sued American Electric Power (AEP) for alleged violations of the Clean Air Act in November. We believe the lawsuit will spur action on bringing AEP's older power plants into compliance with pollution control standards.

D. Pesticide Use Reduction

In coalition with Rivers Unlimited and the Innovative Farmers of Ohio, we developed a strategy for reducing the use of harmful pesticides in weedkillers in Ohio, documenting the serious drinking water pollution problems caused by pesticides. We contacted major food processing operations, like Cargill and

Campbell♦s, to enlist their involvement in using their market power to reduce pesticide use, and began work on organizing a broad statewide coalition to educate farmers, consumers, and corporations on how to grow a safer food supply in Ohio.

II. Electric Deregulation

- Community Choice: Although the "insider" lobbyists, legislators, and utilities said it couldn♦t be done, Ohio Citizen Action worked with local officials and other allies in a successful campaign to pass "community choice" provisions as part of Ohio♦s electric deregulation bill in June 1999. The provisions, which allow local governments to bargain for lower electric rates on behalf of their residents, will go into effect in January 2001.
- Nuclear bailout: We continued to oppose First Energy♦s proposal for an \$8.8 billion bailout of its past mistakes, which are known as "stranded costs." Because the legislature punted this decision to the PUCO, we have joined with several allies to challenge First Energy♦s claims in the regulatory and rule-making process.

III. Campaign Finance Reform

- Passage of the Ohio Voters Right-to-Know Act: After a two-year campaign by Ohio Citizen Action and our allies in civic groups and the media, the Ohio General Assembly passed a bill requiring electronic filing of campaign contributions. The bill ran into trouble in July when the House voted to exempt candidates for the General Assembly from the reporting, but a flood of editorials and a strong lobbying effort reversed this decision in the Senate. Citizens will soon be able to find out on the internet, before an election, where candidates for the state legislature and statewide office are getting their money.
- Following the money: Ohio Citizen Action♦s research and public education affiliate, Citizens Policy Center, produced five reports documenting the flow of money in Ohio politics on critical issues including electric deregulation, and tobacco lobbying. We created a website of all campaign contributions to legislators and candidates in the 1997-98 election cycle.
- TV coverage of elections: Ohio Citizen Action joined the Alliance for Better Campaigns, whose aim is to get local television stations to provide five minutes of news programming each night on candidates and campaigns.

- Debating campaign finance reforms: We organized two seminars, one in Columbus and one in Cincinnati, on campaign finance reform issues, which were well-attended and included lively debate on the possibilities for campaign finance reform in Ohio.

IV. Protecting Citizens Rights in Court

The Ohio Supreme Court overturned, by a vote of 4 to 3, a sweeping tort reform bill which had been passed by the Ohio General Assembly in 1996. Ohio Citizen Action had filed a friend-of-the-court brief urging the court to take this action. We also launched a public education campaign on the impact of the decision, as well as on the voting record and campaign contributions of candidates for the Ohio Supreme Court in the November 2000 elections.

V. Organizational Development

- Membership communications: We made two major strides in membership communications in 1999: the publication and development of full-color newsletters, with covers donated by Ohio artists, beautiful layout, interesting content, and advertising; and the implementation of a lively, constantly updated website, with useful resources and daily news bulletins.
- Board development: Following a plan developed at the October 1998 board retreat, both Ohio Citizen Action and Citizens Policy Center recruited new board members in 1999, adding several energetic and skilled individuals who will strengthen the board in years to come.
- Financial management: We continued to improve our management of financial systems, including reporting and budgeting. The finance department also coordinated the successful move into our new Cleveland office headquarters, and upgraded the department's computer system for Y2K compliance.
- Canvass: 1999 was a year of change for the canvass. In the field, each of our five field canvass offices had a new director during the course of the year. As we head into the spring of 2000, we have a staff of completely "home-grown" canvass directors throughout the state -with all the directors having started out as Ohio canvassers. In October, we also changed the leadership of the phone canvass, and are heading into 2000 in a much stronger position.
- Canvassers conference: We were also pleased to host the summer canvassers conference for canvassers from across the country at Ohio State

University in August, and appreciated their help with a rousing press conference on the EPA enforcement issues.