



Longtime Attorney Tabbed as Next Utility Consumer Advocate

July 18, 2023

The next Ohio Consumers' Counsel is a familiar face.

Maureen Willis, currently the office's acting legal director, was selected Tuesday by the Consumers' Counsel's Governing Board to succeed outgoing agency head Bruce Weston.

Effective Oct. 1, a day after Mr. Weston's planned retirement date, Ms. Willis will become the state's fifth Consumers' Counsel – the state's top advocate for consumers on utility-related issues. The board set her salary at \$175,000.

"I will make it my job and duty to do the best that I can to continue to represent the utility consumers and residential consumers in the best way possible," Ms. Willis said in an interview. "And I thank the board for the opportunity, and I'm honored to serve as the next consumers' counsel."

She was among three finalists for the job, along with Deputy Consumers' Counsel Angela O'Brien and Owens Corning Senior Counsel Madeline Fleisher.

In tabbing Ms. Willis for the job, the board selected an attorney who has been with the agency for more than 40 years, beginning with her hiring as a legal intern in 1982 by inaugural Consumers' Counsel Bill Spratley. Since then, she has remained a near constant at the agency – including as associate and then assistant consumers' counsel – despite a few detours in public and private practice.

The appointment was made after a nearly three-hour executive session in which the board interviewed both internal candidates. Ms. Fleisher was interviewed last month. Returning to public session, the board's vote on the hire was unanimous.

"Their abilities as advocates for consumers were all fairly similar in their backgrounds and that's what made it so difficult," Board Chair Michael Watkins said. "I think the consensus of the board

was that because of Maureen's time with the agency that gave her a slight edge above the other two candidates that we considered."

Ms. O'Brien, formerly an assistant consumers' counsel, was named to the deputy spot by the board in June. In a show of support, the board on Tuesday boosted her salary from \$142,000 to \$155,000 to reflect the expectation she will shoulder added duties during the transition.

Ms. Willis' stints outside OCC include time with the Washington D.C. Office of the People's Counsel, the Montgomery County Prosecutors' Office, and in former Ohio Attorney General Betty Montgomery's office.

But through it all, she said, the OCC "has always been a place to come home to."

She last rejoined the office in 2004 as associate consumers' counsel where she litigated cases, leading to her appointment in January 2023 as senior counsel. She was named acting legal director in April.

"I've been a leader at the agency, sort of in-house so I've been behind the scenes, but I'm ready to step it up and ready to lead the agency into the next few years and to make the right choices and do the right things for consumers," she said.

Her application was among the second batch received by the board after only three applied to the initial job posting.

"I thought, we need to continue the legacy, we need consistency and stability and that's what I bring to the agency," she said.

She said she expects issues requiring the office's continued attention in the months ahead to include: repealing the last vestiges of the 2019 energy law (HB6, 133rd General Assembly), pushing back on pending ratemaking legislation (SB 102) the office opposes, and continuing to seek legislation to ensure refunds for charges deemed unlawful by the court.

The incoming agency director she will spend the next few months before her formal start date soaking up knowledge from Mr. Weston and fashioning relationships with lawmakers, who recently boosted agency support by \$500,000 in the Fiscal Year 2024-2025 operating budget (HB 33).

Ms. Willis, who served at OCC in 2011 when its budget was slashed by \$3 million, called the increase a "giant step forward."

"We lost half of our employees," she said of the 2011 turmoil, "and yet we knew we had to pick up the pieces and continue and we were able to do that. But now with more funding that will enable us to better represent consumers. So we think it's a new chapter and a good chapter for consumers."

Mr. Weston announced his intent to retire in January after 12 years at the agency's helm. His selection of an official end date on Tuesday came a day after he received the Robert F. Manifold Lifetime Service Award from the National Association of State Utility Consumer Advocates.

Mr. Watkins, the sole remaining board member from when Mr. Weston was appointed in 2011, called it a "well deserved retirement."

"I hope you find a nice hobby or two," he added. "I suggest pickleball."

Mr. Weston replied: "One of my hobbies is calling you."

"Unfortunately," joked Mr. Watkins, whose board term expires later this year, "my number's going to be changed."

Reprinted with permission – Gongwer News Service – Ohio www.gongwer-oh.com