

A PUBLIC LETTER OF SUPPORT FOR THE LAKE ERIE BILL OF RIGHTS AND THE VISION IT ARTICULATES

On February 26, 2019, voters of Toledo, Ohio made history by passing the Lake Erie Bill of Rights (LEBOR). The law was the first in the United States to recognize the rights of a specific ecosystem, representing an exciting step forward for the global Rights of Nature movement.

“Lake Erie, and the Lake Erie watershed, possess the right to exist, flourish, and naturally evolve,” it reads. “The people of the City of Toledo possess the right to a clean and healthy environment, which shall include the right to a clean and healthy Lake Erie and Lake Erie ecosystem.”

Toledo residents moved beyond conventional modes of change when it became clear no government agency was protecting them or taking proactive steps toward safeguarding the drinking water of millions of people and the continued health of the Lake Erie ecosystem. In 2014, residents were told an algal bloom had made the municipal water, which comes from Lake Erie, poisonous to the touch.

Residents with Toledoans for Safe Water collaborated with Tish O’Dell of the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund to organize and draft LEBOR.

After two years of organizing and several legal and corporate challenges, LEBOR was passed in a special election. The municipal charter amendment is not an empty declaration of values. Rather, it experiments with new forms of environmental protection and enforcement that transform municipal governments into venues of civic participation and the defenders of basic rights to water and life, for humans and the natural world.

Further, LEBOR takes on the power structure. “Corporations,” it reads, “that violate this law, or that seek to violate this law, shall not be deemed to be ‘persons.’” It envisions a structural power shift within the law.

In the end, it was the local vote heard around the world.

By passing LEBOR, the people of Toledo not only changed law in the city, they forced people to start questioning our relationship with nature. In other words, contributing to a cultural shift in thinking about nature. When culture shifts the laws that govern should follow.

A key court date for LEBOR is currently scheduled for January 28 at 10:00 AM at the Toledo Federal Courthouse before Judge Zouhary. Oral arguments will be heard. Drewes Farm Partnership will be arguing it’s corporate “rights” have been harmed by the people’s vote.

Now is when the hard work begins. In response to LEBOR’s passage, the Ohio government has devoted over \$600,000,000 on empty promises to help the lake. It has also taken an explicitly hostile stance against LEBOR by joining with the corporate plaintiff to overturn LEBOR and by passing industry-drafted language to undermine Rights of Nature enforcement throughout the state.

LEBOR is touching a nerve. Ultimately, it is but one spear launched by we, the people, at a body of law that privileges corporate power and commerce above the most basic rights to water, life, and our continued survival.

Movements for systemic change require many spears.

The Rights of Nature is not a new concept. But it is one whose time has come. With a mass extinction and severe environmental injustice upon us, the concept has taken on a momentum of its own. It is being advanced in countries around the world, as well as by indigenous nations and municipal governments in the United States. It is a central demand of many youth, and daily, we receive inquiries and messages of support.

The undersigned support the Lake Erie Bill of Rights and the vision it articulates: a future where the rights of humans and ecosystems trump the “rights” of corporations and profit.

Michele Carducci

CEDEUAM – UniSalento (Lecce Italy)