

Erik Kvarsten, Gresham City Manager
Testimony in favor of Senate Bill 500
Human Services and Early Childhood Committee
Tuesday, March 10, 3:00 pm

Dear Chair Gelser and Members of the Committee:

For more than a century, the Boys & Girls Clubs have been a staple in communities across America, offering their proven brand of youth development and guidance for our nation's most at-risk youth. These Clubs can be found throughout our state from Portland to Ontario and down to Coos Bay. But not in Gresham.

Over the past couple of years, the City of Gresham has developed a strong partnership with the Boys & Girls Clubs of Portland Metropolitan Area. The Clubs are eager to bring their services to Gresham's youth, and our residents are thrilled about the prospect of having a Boys & Girls Club in Gresham. In the interim, the Boys & Girls Clubs have begun serving some Gresham youth through scaled-back operations within three public schools, as well as in three of our city's parks through our new Summer Kids in the Park program. But as wonderful as these programs are, they are no substitute for the community's real need: a full-sized, full-service facility dedicated to youth development located in the heart of Rockwood, our West Gresham neighborhood with the greatest number of youth in need.

The timing for this new Boys & Girls Club couldn't be better. From 2000-2012, the number of Gresham residents living in poverty has grown by 148.5% while the overall population grew by just 17.6%. All the data shows that Gresham is rapidly becoming more diverse and economically challenged. Meanwhile, our own budget constraints have prevented the city from operating a youth recreation department for more than a decade. With a growing need and a lack of other resources, there is arguably no community in the state in greater need of a Boys & Girls Club right now.

The proposed facility and this important bill represent smart investments in health, education, and public safety. When this new Boys & Girls Club opens its doors, it will create opportunity for hundreds of at-risk youth every day. According to the most recent Boys & Girls Club National Outcomes Report, these young people will immediately become more likely to graduate from high school, more likely to attend college, less likely to get involved with drugs and alcohol, less likely to engage in physical fights, and a host of other positive outcomes. This is exactly what Gresham needs, in order to stimulate and sustain long-term progress in the community. Thank you for your consideration of this very important request.