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March 9, 2015

To: House Rules Committee  
From: Kate Titus, Common Cause Oregon  
Re: Support for HB 2945

Common Cause supports HB 2945 to increase transparency in the redistricting process.

### **Common Cause**

Common Cause is a nonpartisan organization that works to safeguard and improve the democratic process. For 45 years, the organization has helped strengthen public participation and faith in our institutions of self-government, and has worked to ensure that government serves and is accountable to the public interest.

### **Role in Redistricting**

Common Cause has a history of leadership on redistricting, both nationally and here in Oregon. The organization played a nonpartisan, public interest role in Oregon's last redistricting process, providing input to the House and Senate redistricting committees, public information through the media, and by working to support public participation in hearings organized by the legislature. Following redistricting, we released a report: [\*Oregon's 2011 Redistricting: Successes, Concerns, and Recommended Improvements\*](#), which lays out recommendations for specific reforms to improve our state redistricting. This bill addresses our top priority recommendation.

### **HB 2945 and Amendment**

First off, I want to clarify that this bill – as currently written – does not capture our intent. Common Cause and the Redistricting Matters coalition miscommunicated with legislative drafting about our proposal. However, we now have an amendment to the bill that more accurately reflects our goal. So I will speak here to the intended concept, in the amended bill.

Secondly, I want to thank Rep. Parrish for her leadership on this bill. I appreciate that she readily understood the importance of this reform, and stepped up early when others might have hesitated to take this on. This is a bill that requires a closer look to fully appreciate. At first glance, it may raise concerns that it would somehow handicap or embarrass the political parties or legislators in the redistricting process. However, as you look more closely, I believe you'll come to see that this proposal is in everyone's best interest.

### **Support for 2945 (as amended)**

As district lines are redrawn, every set of options involves a set of impacts or trade-offs, affecting the partisan and demographic breakdown of the districts involved. While legislators are prohibited from drawing the lines for the *specific purpose of benefitting one party over another*, they need not try to hide that such impacts inevitably exist. To the contrary, this information needs to be out in the open, available to both legislators and the public.

Transparency enables legislators to make informed decisions and enables the public to ensure that one side or the other is not clearly gerrymandering the lines to shut out some set of voters, be it based on political party, race, or some other demographic. Transparency also helps the public to better appreciate how challenging the process is, even with the best of intentions.

It is currently cost-prohibitive for the public (and very expensive for the political parties) to access the basic information necessary to evaluate these impacts. The political parties spend significant sums to access data so they're able to evaluate how various draft maps will impact even the most basic demographic breakdowns within and across districts. Since they then view this information secretly behind closed doors, it is in fact back-room dealing. Instead it should be acknowledged that it is both legal and necessary for legislators to understand how various redistricting options impact a range of demographics – as long as they do so out in the open.

Oregon could make this basic data much more accessible to both the parties and the public, simply by joining nearly every other state in the country in providing review and input to the Federal Census Bureau on precinct boundaries through the Bureau's block boundary suggestion program. If Oregon participated in this program, it would be possible to correlate census data down to the precinct level, so that it could be easily correlated with Oregon voter file. This would enable both the parties and the public to access the data needed to consider the impact of various draft redistricting maps on basic demographics such as party, race and gender.

Oregon could do even more to make this information useful to all, by making it available online, and by setting up an online interactive mapping site, as some states have done. But the most important step is simply to use the current census process so that accurate data is easily available.

I believe that HB 2945 serves a number of important interests: It makes it clear that legislators can and must look at the data. It brings legislator discussion of the most basic data out in the open, where it becomes legal and legitimate. It provides legislators and parties with one common set of basic demographic information, at little or no cost. And it allows the public to better evaluate the impacts of various options, increasing public appreciation for how challenging the process is, while providing a check against gerrymandering.

Regardless – transparency is the right thing to do.

Common Cause commends the House Rules Committee for deliberating on this important issue. We urge you to support HB 2945, voting it out of committee for consideration by your colleagues in the full House Chamber.