



April 12, 2105

Chair Chris Edwards
Senate Committee on Environment and Natural Resources
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Dear Chair Edwards and committee members:

We write to you today in opposition to SB 748. The Hood River Valley Residents Committee is a 501(c)(3) non-profit and Oregon's oldest local land-use advocacy group. For 38 years, our mission has been to protect farms, forests, wild places and the livability of the urban areas of Hood River County through monitoring, advocacy and education.

SB 748 allows an easy path to an exception to any and all of the goals of Oregon's land use program in counties that are experiencing high unemployment, a lack of growth, or high poverty levels if the local government finds that 10 high-paying jobs would be created. If the bill were law today, about two-thirds of Oregon's counties— 23 of 36 —would qualify under one of the exemptions laid out by the proposed bill. A "statewide" land-use system that two-thirds of counties can opt out of is no statewide system at all.

This is a poorly conceived and poorly written piece of legislation. The bill erroneously presumes a causal relationship between our land-use laws and bad economic outcomes. High unemployment, population loss and high poverty are not caused by the land-use laws that protect farm and forestland. Indeed, there is good evidence that our land-use laws-- in combination with beneficial tax policies-- have strengthened the agricultural and forestry economies of our state by protecting large blocks of resource land for resource uses. Agriculture is one of the state's top industries and employers, yet this bill seeks to undermine it by creating a patchwork of exempt properties in two-thirds of Oregon counties.

We live in a cyclical economy—there are periods of expansion and periods of contraction—yet the built environment outlasts those cycles. Recessions happen fairly frequently. Between 1945 and 2009 the National Bureau of Economic Research has defined eleven cycles, with the average cycle lasting a bit over 5-1/2 years. But Oregon's land-use system takes a longer view of where we want to go as a state. Protecting the economic viability of farms and forests is something we do for our grandchildren's generation, not a short-term goal subject to the whims of five-year business cycles.

One of the goals of the statewide land-use system is to provide property owners with certainty about the development allowed on their own and their neighbors' properties. Under this bill, the rules on a given piece of land become a moving target depending on the cyclical economic fortunes of the county—sometimes the statewide land use rules apply and sometimes they do not.

It is hard to see the link between the problems (high unemployment, high poverty or population decline) and the solution (eliminating the land-use laws). If you asked a resident of Malheur County who is moving someplace else for the reason for his move, we do not believe “too strict of land-use laws” would be on the list.

Along with a solution that is unrelated to the problems, this bill provides no mechanism to prove that relaxing land-use laws actually provides the benefit –10 high paying jobs—required by the legislation. There is no requirement that the jobs are permanent and no prescribed method to prove that they materialize at all.

Undoubtedly, there are parts of the state in need of economic stimulus. SB 748 offers no true economic stimulus, it is really just a collateral attack on land-use laws that the majority of Oregonians support.

Thank you for your consideration.

Best regards,

Heather Staten
Executive Director