

February 24, 2016

Senator Elizabeth Steiner Hayward, Co-Chair
Representative Greg Smith, Co-Chair
Joint Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on General Government
Oregon Legislative Assembly

Re: SB 1586

Co-Chairs and Members of the Committee:

OSPIRG supports SB 1586. This legislation will encourage greater public engagement with Oregon's democratic process, both on and off campus, and further advance the critical role of Oregon's colleges and universities in fostering civic engagement and informed citizenship.

Oregon's public institutions of higher education have an indispensable role in shaping the state's citizens and future leaders. This is reflected in the mission statements of Oregon's public universities, which cite goals including "fostering the next generation of transformational leaders and informed participants in the global community" (University of Oregon) and promoting "economic, social, cultural and environmental progress for the people of Oregon, the nation and the world" (Oregon State University). As lynchpin institutions in our state, public colleges and universities have an opportunity to educate, inform and engage their students as citizens, not just in the classroom. By taking a few common-sense steps to expand voter registration, civic participation outreach and ballot access on campus, SB 1586 will strengthen the public purpose of Oregon's institutions of higher learning.

SB 1586 will also enable broader public participation in Oregon's democracy off campus by enabling citizens to submit vote-by-mail ballots without the need for a postage stamp. By doing so, SB 1586 represents a small step toward adapting Oregon's voting system to the reality that postal mail is an increasingly rare form of communication for individuals, and that a growing number of Oregonians—of every age, background, income and geographic location—rarely use stamps. Some critics of SB 1586 have suggested that the state's provision of postage would be akin to the state providing free pencils for voters to use to fill in their ballots, but this comparison is specious. Writing implements remain essential, ubiquitous tools of day-to-day life for Oregonians, while stamps have become less and less necessary, and less and less prevalent.

The cost of a stamp represents only a tiny expense for most Oregonians, but removing this small barrier will make it that much easier for the public to participate in the democratic process. We believe that the benefits will be well worth the modest but real cost to the state of implementing this provision.

SB 1586 is a common-sense measure that will strengthen Oregon's democracy. We urge your support. Thank you for your consideration.

Jesse Ellis O'Brien, OSPIRG Policy Director