



Support for Paid Postage

April 24, 2019

Chair Wagner, Chair Smith, and members of the committee,

My name is Samantha Gladu and I am the Executive Director of the Bus Project. We are thrilled that the Secretary of State has included policy option package 207 in their budget, a package which would support implementation of paid postage for ballots. We are supportive of this.

We would like to draw your attention to SB 861, the bill to improve our elections system and turn every mailbox into a drop box. This bill is awaiting referral to a ways and means budget subcommittee and we respectfully request that you hold a hearing on SB 861 and pass it in conjunction with the Secretary of State's budget so that they have the authority needed to implement paid postage for ballots. We have worked on this bill for over four years, and in that time the momentum has built so that supporters include a bipartisan and multicultural swath of Oregon.

We have led the country in voter registration and in voter turnout. But we know Oregon can always improve, and continue to push the country forward. Having paid postage for ballots will help increase our voter turnout even more, especially in local elections. When King County in Washington tested pre-paid postage, they found special and local elections had higher turnout. In a special election in Maple Valley, turnout was 37% percent, up from 32% in the previous special election. In the Shoreline School District, turnout was 40% where in previous elections it hovered at 30%. After their testing, Washington State implemented pre-paid postage for all elections in 2018 and has plans to continue for future elections.

It is our duty to remove logistical barriers to voting so that we can include as many voices as possible. APANO and Disability Rights Oregon have helped highlight the logistical barriers for people across this state, from the final hurdle in ballot assistance to transportation, and personal financial barriers of people with disabilities. We also know this is a barrier for young people across the state. 42% of new, first time voters don't have a stamp in their home. But it's not just about young people-- it's about all people who are working multiple jobs, going to school, supporting their families, and more. For Oregonians who are facing multiple intersecting barriers to the ballot, their lawmakers, and

government services, having to find a stamp or a ballot box can be the deciding factor whether to turn in a ballot or not.

You might say, is it really that hard to just find a ballot box? Yes. It can be, especially for people in more rural areas of the state. Data from 2016 indicates that the five counties with the lowest turnout (less than 77%) are considered “rural.” Each has less than 10 drop boxes. Some counties have ballot boxes that are *two hours* away from their county elections offices. We know that if county election clerks are driving two hours to pick up ballots, voters in these counties are also driving long, impossible distances to drop their ballots off at a box or their local county elections office.

The Bus Project has prioritized voter registration with communities who do not have political parity, and who are often overlooked. When the Bus Project was doing voter registration at P:ear, a homeless services organization that serves youth in Portland, our Program Coordinator spoke to one young woman, Jessica, about her plan to vote before the 2018 midterm elections. Maddie was shocked to hear that Jessica was not planning to vote because she didn’t have a stamp. They were sitting less than a mile from the closest ballot box, and this young woman wasn’t going to turn in a ballot because she couldn’t envision getting it turned in. The stamp piece got her, and she didn’t know about ballot boxes. We talk about vote plans often in our work, because we know that when people go through the steps of visualizing and planning how they’ll turn in their ballots, they’re more likely to do it. Every Oregonian deserves to be able to visualize how they’ll turn in their ballot. Every Oregonian deserves to have a say, and implementing paid postage is one more step Oregon can take to set the example of what it’s like to have elections, or democracy, done right.

Younger voters and voters of color are least likely to know about Oregon’s all vote-by-mail system. Only 35% of new, first time voters know that they we don’t go to polling places in Oregon. 22% think voters have a choice and 36% are totally unsure. Enhancing civic participation in Oregon’s elections can be solved through a combination of education about the state’s vote-by-mail system and a law that provides postage paid envelopes for ballots for all voters, which would especially help the state’s younger voters to overcome barriers to voting.

While this policy requires a financial investment, the payoff it will have on the fabric of our communities and the turnout in our elections is priceless. Every Oregon voter, regardless of where they live, how old they are, or whether they require a special ballot, should have an opportunity to weigh in on issues of critical importance to them and to their community, free of barriers.

We hope that you’ll send SB 861 it off with a unanimous do pass recommendation!