

Oregon Legislative Policy and Research Office  
Attn: Redistricting Team  
900 Court St. NE, Room 453, Salem, OR 97301

September 13, 2021

To the Honorable Chairs and Members of the Redistricting Committee,

On September 3, 2021, as we headed into the Labor Day holiday, legislative leaders released proposed redistricting maps for the Oregon house of representatives and the Oregon senate. Less than a week later, beginning the week of September 8, 2021, debate and public testimony on the proposed district lines began. Very few organizations had adequate time to digest the proposals, let alone mobilize a thoughtful community response reflecting historical perspective and collective insight. Given that we are establishing the lines for electoral representation – the framework of our democracy – we need to hear from voices and communities often sidelined, communities like the Black and historic African American community in Portland.

We appreciate the complexity of redistricting, especially given the growth of the Portland area over the last decade. We also appreciate that many folks in the legislature and community have been working on proposed redistricting options thus far. However, we remain deeply concerned that the proposed maps appear to disregard the interests of our communities at best, or to intentionally fragment our communities at worst. In either case, the outcome is not good. There is no other way to put it, the legislative timeline, process, and proposed maps are unacceptable.

We have navigated the adverse impact of having our interests ignored in the legislative redistricting process before. In the 1990 process, the districts of Senator Margaret Carter and Senator Avel Gordly, two of the three Black folks in the state legislature at the time (the other being Senator Jackie Winters, Salem) were moved in such a way that Senators Carter and Gordly would have had to run against each other. That outcome would have been horrible and would have dramatically reduced our representation in the Oregon Senate. Senator Gordly moved to avoid that outcome; she remains in that home to this day. Senator Gordly paid a high price to represent us. We cannot allow this disregard in the redistricting process to play out again in 2021.

While we have not yet had time to organize and create our own proposed maps for new legislative districts, there are at least three topics that must be considered to devise a fair outcome for the Black and historic African-American communities of Portland.

**1. REPRESENTATION OF EXISTING BLACK COMMUNITIES**

Representation Black Portlanders in zip codes in inner north and northeast Portland; particularly those zip codes with more than 10% Black populations.



**2. REDISTRICTING IMPACT ON EXISTING BLACK ELECTEDS**

We have so few Black voices and leaders in the legislature. We do not want them redistricted out. How will the proposed maps impact Senators Jama, Manning, Frederick and Representative Bynum?

**3. REDISTRICTING IMPACT ON EXISTING CANDIDATES**

We have so few Black voices and leaders running for election to the legislature. Again, we do not want to impair their chances of being elected with redistricting. Winning is hard enough. How will the proposed maps impact Oregon Senate candidate Akasha Lawrence Spence?

We understand that the legislature will debate redistricting alternatives for the next few weeks. If no agreement is reached, then Secretary of State Shemia Fagan will determine state legislative districts. At this time, we do not think that any of the proposed redistricting plans are acceptable, and therefore, we look forward to engaging with Secretary of State Fagan to assure a more balanced plan is adopted.

For the last 18 months we have all been engaged in piercing public dialogue about inequitable systems and processes that continue to reflect the exclusion etched into Oregon's culture at its founding. The time for equity talk is over. It's time to talk the walk. Let's get this redistricting done right.

Respectfully,

Nkenge Harmon Johnson (Congressional District 5)  
President and CEO of the Urban League of Portland  
Portland, OR 97227  
Phone: 503.280.2600  
Fax: 503.281.2612