

Co-Chairs Taylor and Salinas, Vice-Chairs, Knopp, and Boshart-Davis, and members of the redistricting committees,

My name is Blanca Gaytan Farfan, and I have been a resident in East Multnomah County for the last 19 years. I grew up attending K-12 education and college in East County and have grown to call this community my home. Now, I am serving as the Director of Programs at East County Rising Community Projects.

East County Rising Community Projects organizes and builds grassroots leadership within East Multnomah County to create an equitable and livable community centered on the needs of the most underrepresented and marginalized residents. Our geographic boundary of work stretches from 82nd Avenue in East Portland to the cities of Gresham, Fairview, Wood Village, and Troutdale, and unincorporated areas to the eastern border of Multnomah County. Our geographic focus aims to address the social and economic disparities between West and East Multnomah County. In East Multnomah County, 20% of the population falls under the poverty line and 26% of children face poverty, which is the highest rate in the entire state, and it is the most racially diverse area in the county.

Since the last census and redistricting process in 2010, there have been a number of shifts in East Multnomah County. Our community has grown to be one of the most diverse areas in Oregon, with over 70 languages spoken, and become home to many immigrant and refugee communities that have brought their unique insights, cultures, and values. The diversity of experiences, cultures, and knowledge positions East County as a geographic area with all the conditions to flourish.

However, far too often our communities are not included in the decisions that affect them, and as a result are deprived of the resources they need. Our diverse residents are vastly underrepresented in elected office, and current barriers to civic engagement often erase or tokenize their narratives and existence.

In 2020, we collaborated with the We Count Oregon campaign and successfully helped to increase the amount of “hard-to-count” communities in East Multnomah County and across the state that completed their census by connecting with more than 12,400 people. These “Hard-to-count” communities, who include people of color, children under five, renters, immigrants, people with limited English proficiency, multiple-family homes, Native tribal and urban communities, disabled people, and LGBTQSIA+ individuals, are also communities of interest for redistricting.

When we consider which groups should be prioritized as communities of interest, we must also consider what political and economic power these groups have. It is

imperative to recognize the importance of centering “Hard-to-count” communities in redistricting and ensure they are kept together. Not doing so will further the disparities our communities are already facing.

For many of these individuals and families, 2020 was their first time completing the census and it required us to heavily focus on an educational and culturally responsive approach to increase community participation. Redistricting is another new civic engagement process for many of our communities in East County, but one that is significantly important to make sure they see the full circle of why completing their census mattered in the first place, in addition to achieving representation of our communities’ diversity and ensuring all of our needs are met.

East County residents have knowledge of their communities’ assets, strengths, and experiences. Unless the state makes a concerted effort to learn from East County communities, the State of Oregon will fail to benefit from their expertise and insight, and is at risk of damaging their well-being.

Our communities need a transparent and accessible redistricting process so that every East County resident, no matter their ethnicity, income, housing situation, gender, age, preferred language, and immigration status, has the tools and information they need to understand how redistricting works and how it affects them, and has the opportunity to provide input about how lines can be drawn that make it possible for them to elect public servants that truly represent them.

Thank you,
Blanca Gaytan Farfan
Director of Programs at East County Rising Community Projects