

9 February 2021

Senator Lee Beyer, Chair
Senate Committee On Energy and Environment
Oregon State Capitol
900 Court Street NE
Salem, OR 97301

Re: Multnomah County Support SB 286

Dear Chair Beyer, Vice Chair Findley and Members of the Committee:

Multnomah County urges your support of Senate Bill 286. This bill is arguably the most important effort in a generation to address environmental injustice in Oregon. In the face of a growing climate crisis, and historic inequities that have remained unaddressed for too long, the State has a moral duty and practical interest in strengthening environmental justice statutes.

The Multnomah County office of Sustainability believes that the best solution to environmental problems is to eradicate the root causes of injustice in our community, that our entire community thrives when we meet the needs of the most vulnerable, and that community-driven solutions are more effective and long-lasting. But, for too long, the communities most burdened by pollution and most threatened by a warming climate have been unheard at best and willfully ignored at worst. It is time for the State to embrace community voices, institutionalize their knowledge into natural resource agency policy making, and ensure the administrative capacity exists within the State government to carry these practices forward.

Communities of color and other environmental justice communities are disproportionately exposed to emissions, pollution, and other negative externalities due to historic policies, like redlining, and too often to current government action or inaction. Look at any pollutant and the data will most likely show a disproportionate concentration in environmental justice communities. This is certainly true in Multnomah County where diesel PM pollution¹, wood

¹ Multnomah County Health Department. 2014 Report Card on Racial and Ethnic Disparities. Portland 2014.

smoke pollution², and urban heat islands³ are all disproportionately concentrated in communities of color. One of the primary ways that environmental injustices manifest is in population health, as disease and premature death related to environmental hazards continue to disproportionately burden low income and BIPOC community members. Among the conditions affected by environmental hazards are respiratory and cardiovascular disease, underlying conditions that have worsened the impact of COVID-19. As the Local Public Health Authority, it is Multnomah County's job to protect community health, and we need strong state agency partnership to make progress in eliminating disparities.

Unless environmental justice is central to environmental and natural resource policy-making, government policy will continue to risk leading to environmental unjust outcomes. Multnomah County's Environmental Justice Resolution seeks to mitigate that risk by directing us to apply an environmental justice lens in our sustainability and environmental health work.⁴ This approach, in our experience has led to better policy making and helped to prioritise the use of limited resources, including staff time, when prioritizing which issues to work on.

Although Oregon Environmental agencies have had environmental justice obligations in state administrative rule and law since 1993, these efforts have fallen short. For example, Oregon's 2008 environmental justice law, SB 420 codified as ORS 182.538 et seq., established the Environmental Justice Task Force but also mandated that state natural resources agencies address environmental justice issues as part of standard operations.⁵ All of the States natural resource agencies have fallen short of implementing this law, with some completely ignoring the law in its entirety. To date no listed natural resource agency has hired a full time position to focus on environmental justice, let alone provided the administrative support to make such a position successful. And, the Environmental Environmental Justice Task Force ("the Taskforce") has lacked dedicated professional staff and other administrative support commensurate with their important role.

² Oregon Department of Environmental Quality. *Portland Area Pollutant Summary Sheets/Maps for Air Toxics*. Portland 2012.

³ Hoffman, Shandas, Pendleton. "The Effects of Historical Housing Policies on Resident Exposure to Intra-Urban Heat: A Study of 108 US Urban Areas." *Climate*. 13 January 2020.

⁴ Multnomah County, *Resolution 2018-108* (Nov. 8, 2018), <https://multco.us/file/76250/download>.

⁵ State of Oregon Environmental Justice Task Force. *Environmental Justice: Best Practices for Oregon's Natural Resource Agencies*. Salem, Oregon, January, 2016.

Despite limited resourcing, the Taskforce has done important work in elevating environmental justice communities concerns at the state level. SB 286 changes the name of the Task Force to the Environmental Justice Council (the Council), and establishes an expanded Council within the Department of Environmental Quality. SB 286 should also result in a Council that is better resourced and supported than the Task Force has been. In addition, the bill directs the agency to examine the cumulative impacts of pollution on environmental justice communities, the result of which would be a greatly enhanced understanding of environmental problems in the state. The changes proposed in SB 286 are long overdue, but welcome, and offer necessary corrective actions that will improve consideration of environmental justice in Oregon

Multnomah County remains committed to advancing environmental justice in our work and looks forward to supporting the Council and its important work. In addition, the cumulative impact tools developed under this statute will greatly aid local governments, and state agencies. We urge the legislature to seize this important opportunity and pass SB 286.

Sincerely,



John Wasitynski