

Testimony in Support of House Bill 2006

Members of the House Committee on Housing,

My name is James Cook and I am a resident of Redmond Oregon and a local advocate for those experiencing homelessness.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 2006, which addresses the state's emergency shelter needs for Oregonians experiencing homelessness. This need is especially acute in Central Oregon.

In the last year, a dozen unhoused people in our region have died from exposure. Their deaths were preventable. At the same time, we experienced two emergency situations that threatened the health of our unhoused neighbors; dangerous levels of smoke this summer and a delayed opening of the Bend Cold Weather Shelter this winter. In both cases, volunteers responded by opening a shelter in a local church literally overnight. The efforts were heroic and possibly lifesaving but are neither sustainable long term nor an effective use of our resources and volunteers. We need full time shelters in all of our communities.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to the creation of new shelters is finding an allowable and suitable location for siting a shelter. And, once a location is found, the time and cost of complying with zoning requirements and the possible appeals process is often prohibitive, especially for non-profits operating with small staffs and limited budgets.

The super-siting provisions of HB 2006 would greatly ease this burden. Indeed, in Central Oregon we have seen how the 90-day version of the shelter siting provisions from House Bill 4212 from the 2020 1st Special Session allowed two projects, the Central Oregon Veterans Village and a tiny shelter village by St. Vincent de Paul of Bend, to move forward. We have also seen how current zoning restrictions have slowed the progress of Project Turnkey shelters in Bend and Redmond.

In addition, there is one area of the bill that I hope you will consider expanding. The safe parking provisions in Section 6 of the bill currently apply only to religious institutions. The effectiveness of these provisions could be greatly increased if they also applied to private businesses and public entities with surplus parking space. I hope you will consider this change.

The passage of HB 2006 will allow Central Oregon to move quickly to address our need for permanent shelters. I strongly support its passage and thank you for your efforts on behalf of our most vulnerable neighbors.