

March 24, 2021



Co-Chair Representative Mark Meek
Co-Chair Representative Kim Wallan
Representative Janelle Bynum
Representative Vikki Breese-Iverson

To the Members of the House Special Committee On Modernizing the People's Legislature:

Rural Development Initiatives (RDI) is writing to petition the members of the Special Committee to consider the importance of remote testimony and user-friendly online tools in expanding civic engagement opportunities for Rural Oregonians. RDI is grateful to the members of the Special Committee for their attention to and support for modernizing these tools, resources and processes for Oregonians.

When RDI began, first as the Community Initiatives Program of the Oregon Economic Development Department (1989), then later, as a private nonprofit transformed by SB713 (1992), our charge was to assist rural communities experiencing abrupt and devastating changes to their economies. For 28 years, RDI's staff has worked alongside people in Oregon's rural communities as they have grappled with ongoing economic challenges and instabilities, reimagined new economic and community building strategies, built the leadership skills needed to work together, and rolled up their sleeves to do the work.

Rural challenges with access to broadband services has served to intensify the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and wildfire events in rural places, and yet elected officials representing rural places are often looking to hear from constituents most affected by these realities. Rural people have insights that are invaluable as their communities recover from this recession and their voices often go unheard, with many barriers to testifying in person. Remote live oral testimony, written testimony submission, and phone oral testimony options for those with limited to no broadband access are important changes to keep in place.

RDI applauds the Oregon Legislature for making rapid changes to implement virtual tools during the COVID-19 pandemic and in so doing, is making strides toward meeting its goal of improving access for Oregonians. RDI is asking the Special Committee to (1) maintain and improve user friendliness of the remote oral testimony option for Oregonians already committing time and resources to engaging civically, and the new Public Testimony Portal in OLIS that allows the public to submit testimony remotely, (2) support the use of additional tools (i.e video testimony, effective translation and ASL interpretation) that can enable deeper civic participation by rural, disabled and working Oregonians, and (3) consider opportunities for community road shows for major pieces of legislation to increase participation in the process (i.e. 2017 transportation bill, and 2019 education package).

Rurally yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Heidi Khokhar".

Heidi Khokhar
Executive Director

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lauren Kolojechick-Kotch".

Lauren Kolojechick-Kotch
Program Manager

