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May 18, 2023

Oregon Senate Rules Committee
Via Electronic Mail

Re: SB 775 Soil and Water Conservation District Board Eligibility

Dear Chair Lieber and Committee Members,

I strongly support for SB 775, and I urge your Committee to advance this bill.

SB 775 provides a much-needed update to the eligibility rules for board members of soil and water conservation districts. This bill is especially important for urban counties, where today it makes no sense to require that candidates for zoned seats own or manage at least 10 acres of land. This limitation on eligibility ignores the fact that board members in urban districts must consider very different issues in making policy choices and recommendations than those relevant in rural conservation districts.

The changes in SB 775 would only impact six soil and water conservation districts in Oregon because the bill's eligibility amendments only apply to counties with a population of over 250,000. I am a taxpayer in DISTRICT XXX, but I do not own or manage 10 acres of land – indeed, only a miniscule portion of urban counties own or manage that much land. On the other hand, as a past member of a local watershed council and an environmental law professor I have both interest and expertise in urban watershed issues. I therefore find it troubling that people like me cannot run for a board seat for a soil and water conservation district in my county. Let's update this outdated statute and allow for open elections that the most qualified candidate for that zone – including those with expertise in urban water issues for districts in urban areas.

There is a chronic issue of vacancies on soil and water conservation district boards. This is not democracy, and it's not in the best interest of those who care about soil and water health. A diverse and engaged board – elected from as many candidates as want to run – is better for all of us.

There are no restrictions to run for any other special districts such as school boards, fire districts, etc., who are using public tax dollars in open elections on the ballot. I don't believe that the present restrictions on who can run for SWCDs in urban areas is sensible.

Please advance SB 775.

Thank you for your consideration,

/s/ Dan Rohlf