

Date: 4/8/2023

Karol Wai, Youth Voice Youth Vote Participatory Budgeting

Good morning Co- Chairs Steiner and Sanchez and members of the Committee,

My name is Karol Wai, I am a first generation Burmese-Karen immigrant, graduate of the Portland State University Urban Honors College, and nearly a lifelong Oregonian after my family moved to Portland in 1998 from the military-oppressed nation of Burma. To even participate in this meeting today is an honor for me considering that voices of my immigrant and refugee community have historically been neglected, and to experience what it's like to be treated as an option on the menu, to finding my voice through participatory budgeting, and now standing amongst decision-makers at the table, holds immense value to me. Today, I'm here to urge the committee to continue the state's investment in Youth Voice Youth Vote - Oregon's first Participatory Budgeting process.

Participatory Budgeting (PB) is a democratic process in which community members directly decide how to spend a portion of a public budget. It's a tool to tap into the lived experience and collective intelligence of residents to exercise their power to shape solutions in their communities. Youth Voice Youth Vote PB fosters and supports youth civic leadership and public health in the process of identifying community-driven COVID-19 relief and recovery projects funded by \$500,000 in the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). These ARPA funds were committed by State Legislators Kayse Jama, Chris Gorsek, and Ricki Ruiz. Cycle 1 of this youth-led participatory budgeting process is occurring within Senate Districts 24 and 25 and House District 50 in East Multnomah and North Clackamas Counties and is focused on youth ages 13 - 25 years old.

As a steering committee member and process facilitator of Youth Voice, Youth Vote (aka YV²), I have helped facilitate workshops where youth, especially youth from historically marginalized communities, develop Covid-19 relief and recovery projects in the places they live, learn, pray, or play in. It has been an honor to share about PB as a longstanding process in other parts of the world and now knocking on Oregon's door, as a tool to deepen and diversify our democracy.

Youth Voice Youth Vote is only the beginning of PB in our communities. There is a need to continue investment in PB so all communities across our state can make decisions about public dollars in ways that meet their needs. And as much data there is to support PB as an equitable tool for justice, I know that I've lived it, I've experienced it first hand. Participatory budgeting and Youth Voice Youth Vote increases opportunities for leadership and civic engagement and it has passed the mic to voices which are often silenced.

I sincerely thank you all for your time, and I urge the committee to continue Oregon's investment in Youth Voice Youth Vote, specifically by the request of \$1.2 million to fund a 2nd cycle of YV² PB, which will further amplify youth voices and choices to improve our communities. When we invest in our youth, we invest in our futures.