

May 23, 2023

To: Senate Rules Committee

Re: SB 775 Soil and Water Conservation District Board Eligibility

Chair Lieber, Vice Chair Knopp and Members of the Committee,

Senate Bill 775 seeks to update the eligibility rules for soil and water conservation districts so candidates for zoned seats in counties with populations of over 250,000 do not have to own or manage at least 10 acres of land. This is a long overdue update to the current statute.

I have been an elected Director on the West Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District for 17 years and wholeheartedly support an update to the current statute.

- Everyone depends on soil and water for their survival and therefore all people have a fundamental reason to be interested in how natural resources are cared for. If these are democratically elected seats, let them be so. Voters should be the ones to decide who is best qualified to represent their interests.
- The idea that only landowners should have the right to serve on the board of directors is flawed. All SWCDs are supported by public funds, and the opportunity to engage and make decisions on how those public funds are used should not be constrained to people who own or manage land.
- Land ownership in Oregon today is the product of a racist system and centuries of racist policies that reduced or removed access to land for people of color. Any discussion related to land ownership must begin within the context of that unfortunate and unjust history. Defending the land ownership requirement for zone directors today is not likely an intentionally racist act, but it does reinforce and perpetuate the damage done by those policies.
- The path to board membership through the associate board member positions is flawed. Sitting board members vote to approve Associate Directors; the sitting board members are unlikely to represent the diversity of the district for the reasons described above. Needing the attention and approval of those board members in order to become an associate board member is another way in which the current system reinforces the patterns of power and privilege associated with land ownership and access in Oregon.

This simple change will create opportunities for others and improve the lives of Oregonians. Please vote yes on Senate Bill 775.

Thank you,
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