

Testimony in Support of the passage of HB 2964
to the OR House Committee on Housing and Homelessness.

Oregon Needs to Unlock Underutilized Land to Increase the Availability of Affordable Housing in the Heart of our Communities.

My name is Rev. Marshall Wattman-Turner. I'm an Oregon native, who grew up in the Willamette Valley. I retired in 2023, after 40+ years of ministry experience as a community organizer and health promoter, a hospice and hospital chaplain, and pastor of six United Methodist Churches in rural, suburban, and urban areas of Oregon. And, I have lived and worked in the Portland-Tri-County-Metro area for almost 40 years.

There is no question that Oregon needs more affordable housing units. Oregon ranks third in the nation for people experiencing homelessness and first in the nation for unsheltered homelessness among families with children (when adjusted for population size). The number of children experiencing unsheltered homelessness in Oregon is 14 times higher than the national average and nearly three times higher than Hawaii, the second-highest state. These are facts that deeply disturb me and do not align with my life-long love and admiration of Oregon.

By partnering with cash poor and land rich faith communities and other non-profits (particularly those with declining membership and income) **HB 2964** will increase the availability of shovel-ready acreage, within existing Urban Growth Boundaries, for affordable housing projects throughout Oregon. This legislation will provide grants and low-income loans to address the high cost of project feasibility and pre-development services. These expenses often present an insurmountable barrier to smaller community-based organizations, which may be ready and willing to pursue affordable housing projects, but often lack necessary resources, staff, and subject matter expertise, to get development projects ready to apply for construction financing.

HB 2964 will support a pioneering effort in community collaboration, which would provide an enormous return on investment for Oregonians.

Among the six U.M. churches I served as a pastor, from the 1980's to the 2020's, three remain open and three are closed. The closed locations include one in a small rural town, one in an urban location, and one in a thriving suburban community. The urban church hosts a Community Arts Program, a CPR and First Aid Training Center, and a Community Preschool. The suburban church is currently home to a Community Preschool and Playground. The suburban church also includes several acres of highly valuable, development ready property near all community services, public schools, and transit. Church members were ready and willing to pursue affordable housing on their property, but dwindling membership and resources, caused that church to close before realizing that hope. The property is now owned by the United Methodist denomination, which is predisposed to collaborate with other community partners to develop affordable housing.

Among the three U.M. Churches, which remain open, all lie in the Portland-Tri-County-metro area and all facing existential threats due to aging membership and diminishing resources. One in the “Heart of the City” is next to key community services and a thriving Farmer’s Market. That church has a rich history of launching programs to provide free community suppers and free home repairs. It also offers low cost space to multiple small nonprofits, which for many years included the organization that addressed the needs of homeless youth, throughout the county. That Church also frequently hosts free Oregon Food Bank “pop-up” food distribution sites and Red Cross blood drives.

Another small congregation with a large building is located in a very desirable inner SE Portland location. The small remnant of a once thriving congregation have already decided to partner with other community organizations in hopes of developing affordable housing on their property.

The last church I served is in a suburban location. Their property borders on a public elementary school. In the past, they have provided emergency overnight shelter, when needed. Two years ago they committed to actively pursuing the development of affordable housing on their property. Since then they have chosen a developer, with vast experience with community benefit affordable housing, and another non-profit to serve as housing administrator and to provide wrap-around services to residents. Initial feasibility studies indicate a possible range of 30 - 36 units. Church leaders are also exploring a range of options for residents, from below market rents to a limited-equity co-op.

As others have stated in their testimony to the Committee, I firmly believe **HB 2964** will address the critically urgent need for affordable housing in the heart of Oregon’s communities and leverage a time-limited opportunity to access hundreds of acres of buildable land, from willing partners and mission-driven organizations.

I whole-heartedly endorse **HB 2964** and urge the passage of this measure, during the 2025 Oregon Legislative Session.