

Submitter: wayne abbe

On Behalf Of:

Committee: Joint Special Committee On Referendum Petition
2026-302

Measure, Appointment or Topic: SB1599

Dear Chair and Members of the Committee,

I am writing to strongly oppose Senate Bill 1599, which would move the vote on Referendum Petition 2026-302—the people's referendum on the controversial 2025 transportation tax and fee increases—from the November 2026 general election to the May 19, 2026 primary election.

This bill represents an unprecedented and inappropriate interference in the people's constitutional right to refer legislation to the ballot under the conditions they were promised when they signed petitions.

Over 250,000 Oregonians signed petitions to refer portions of Chapter 1, Oregon Laws 2025 (special session)—including the gas tax increase, higher vehicle registration and title fees, and transit payroll tax hike—to the ballot. Those petition signers did so with the clear understanding, based on Oregon law and longstanding practice, that the measure would appear on the November general election ballot, where voter turnout is historically highest and most representative of the full electorate.

SB 1599 would unilaterally change that date to a primary election, which consistently sees far lower turnout—often less than half of November levels. This change would disenfranchise tens or hundreds of thousands of Oregon voters who participate only in general elections, particularly independents, working families, and those less engaged in partisan primaries.

Proponents claim the earlier date would provide "clarity" for ODOT funding. However, public statements and reporting make clear that the real motivation is political: to reduce the chances that voters will reject the tax increases by holding the vote during a lower-turnout election where the electorate is less representative. Even supporters have acknowledged the strategic nature of this timing change.

This is not the first attempt to override or undermine the will of petition signers on this issue. It follows multiple prior efforts in 2025 to advance these same tax and fee hikes despite strong public opposition. Changing the rules after more than a quarter-million Oregonians have acted in good faith sends a dangerous message: that the legislature can retroactively alter the terms of citizen initiatives and referenda when the outcome is politically inconvenient.

Oregon's constitution and election laws exist to protect direct democracy. When citizens gather the required signatures, they earn the right to have their referendum decided by the broadest possible electorate—not a carefully selected subset chosen for its expected voting behavior.

I urge the Committee to reject SB 1599 and allow the referendum on Referendum Petition 2026-302 to proceed as originally scheduled on the November 2026 general

election ballot. Respecting the petition process and maximizing voter participation upholds the principles of democracy that Oregonians expect and deserve. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.