

Submitter: Mark Knowles  
On Behalf Of:  
Committee: Joint Special Committee On Referendum Petition  
2026-302  
Measure, Appointment or Topic: SB1599

To the Members of the 83rd Oregon Legislative Assembly:

As a voter from Bend, Oregon, who cherishes our state's democratic traditions and demands fiscal accountability, I strongly oppose Senate Bill 1599. This bill is a brazen attempt to undermine the will of 250,000 Oregonians who signed Referendum Petition 2026-302, expecting a fair November 2026 vote on the burdensome transportation taxes in HB 3991.

SB 1599 shifts the referendum to the May 19, 2026 primary, where voter turnout plummets. Historical data shows Oregon primaries draw just less than 45% participation. In 2024, it was 35.8% where in the general it was 75.4%. This low turnout favors entrenched interests and suppresses opposition to tax hikes that hit working families hard amid rising costs. It's no accident: the bill compresses deadlines to March 12, 2026, slashing time for voter pamphlet arguments, explanatory statements, and public input, effectively muting dissent.

This maneuver violates the petition's explicit promise of a November vote, designed for maximum engagement. As Representative Ed Diehl warns, "When 250,000 Oregonians sign a petition that clearly promises a November 2026 vote, the government doesn't get to change the rules midstream. Moving the referendum to May by separate legislation is unprecedented, likely unconstitutional, and designed to silence public participation." Under Article IV, section 1 of our Constitution, referendums belong on the general ballot to honor the people's initiative power, not to be manipulated in a rushed primary to shield unpopular policies from scrutiny.

Even worse, SB 1599 sets poor precedent. If lawmakers are allowed to rig election dates for controversial taxes (passed in Governor Kotek's closed-door emergency session) it erodes the people's trust in government and invites future abuses.

Oregonians deserve better: a transparent process that amplifies, not stifles, our voices on issues like HB 3991's fee increases, which burden everyday drivers, businesses, and tax payers alike.

Reject SB 1599. Protect our referendum rights and ensure a fair November vote where all Oregonians can participate.

Respectfully submitted,

Mark Knowles  
Bend, Oregon Voter