

Subject: Written Testimony Opposing SB 1599 — Protect Oregon Citizens' Referendum Rights

Chair Jama, Chair Gomberg, and members of the Joint Special Committee on Referendum Petition 2026-302:

I respectfully submit this testimony in opposition to Senate Bill 1599, which would move the vote on Referendum Petition 2026-302 from the November 2026 general election to the May 19, 2026 primary election.

This is not a major change in Oregon approved referendum procedure and is a significant change to how Oregon has done past business.

Oregonian citizens on all sides testified at the hearing and clearly objected to the tax at issue. However, the transportation funding bill was still passed by the Legislature in 2025 that included major increases in the gas tax, vehicle fees, and payroll taxes intended to raise hundreds of millions to billions in revenue over time. This was a total disconnect and dismissal of Oregonian concerns.

In direct response to that law, opponents used the constitutional referendum power and gathered more than 250,000 signatures — well over three times the approximately 78,000 required — to refer the bill to voters. This overwhelming participation shows broad public concern, not fringe opposition.

Because the referendum garnered an overwhelming number of signatures (three times the number required) you have chosen to create and vote on SB 1599 changing the rules after the petition qualified. To move the vote from November — where turnout is typically highest — to a May primary election where voter turnout significantly lower so that you can try to capitalize on a reduced number and diversity of voters who will decide this issue. It is reasonable to interpret this timing change, in context, as avoiding accountability. Critics quoted in news coverage have said the move is designed to prevent lawmakers and the Governor — who supported and passed the tax — from facing voters on the same ballot as the referendum in November. I agree. However I also believe that you are trying to capitalize on both approaches. The lower turnout in the May primary as well as trying to distance the Governor and those Oregon Senate and house Democrats from being on the same ballot as the referendum hoping that people will forget who dismissed them.

The citizen referendum exists to give broadest number of voters the final say when their elected representatives ignore and pass laws they do not want. The purpose of this constitutional right is defeated if the Legislature can alter the timing of the vote to reduce participation and disadvantage the referendum.

A referendum deciding the fate of a multi-billion-dollar tax should be decided by the broadest possible electorate — not a narrow slice of primary voters that is a fraction of the November turnout.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge you to reject SB 1599 and allow Referendum Petition 2026-302 to proceed on the November 2026 general election ballot, consistent with Oregon's longstanding practice, with public expectations, and with the purpose of the referendum power.

Sincerely,
John W. Yost
Sublimity, Oregon