



Testimony on SB 1599  
Joint Special Committee on Referendum Petition  
Monday, February 9, 2026 — 1:00 PM

Chair, Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I urge you to **oppose SB 1599** — legislation that would move the transportation tax referendum from the **November 3, 2026 General Election** to the **May 19, 2026 Primary Election**. This effort is appearing before you now, and it matters deeply to Oregon voters because it **circumvents the direct will of Oregonians** and undermines our constitutional process.

### **Oregonians Made Their Intent Clear**

Last year, more than **250,000 Oregonians signed petitions** to refer portions of Governor Kotek’s transportation tax and fee increases to the ballot. These petitions were submitted with language that **explicitly stated the issue would appear on the November 3, 2026 general election ballot**. Petitioners followed the law, invested time and energy, and met the legal signature threshold for a statewide referendum.

### **Oregon Law and Constitution Favor General Elections**

The Oregon Constitution’s express language states that **initiative and referendum measures** “shall be submitted to the people ... at the regular general elections, unless otherwise ordered by the Legislative Assembly.” Regular general elections historically have the highest voter turnout and most fully reflect the voice of Oregon voters.

Shifting this critical referendum to a **lower-turnout May primary disenfranchises voters**, especially working families and others who are less likely to participate in primary elections but show up in high numbers in the general election.

### **This Isn’t About Better Policy — It’s About Political Protection**

SB 1599 appears designed not to serve voters, but to **protect a political agenda** that did not have broad public support. Many Oregonians have expressed concern about the size and scope of the tax and fee increases contained in the transportation law that this referendum challenges. The effort to move the vote to May instead of November looks like a strategic attempt to escape accountability for an unpopular tax package.

### **The Budget Picture Has Improved**

Supporters of SB 1599 have argued that the transportation tax increases are necessary to fill holes in the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) budget. Governor Kotek and lawmakers have repeatedly framed the transportation package as something Oregon “needs now.” But this context has changed recently:

- The **latest Oregon Economic and Revenue Forecast** released in early February shows **revenue coming in stronger than expected** and an improved outlook compared to prior projections. This includes higher corporate tax receipts and a projected General Fund balance that’s stronger than earlier forecasts indicated.

- An updated forecast also suggests that **expected revenues have increased leading up to the 2025-27 biennium**, meaning lawmakers have **more resources to balance the budget and fund core services than was previously assumed**.

At a minimum, this evidence suggests legislators have fiscal discretion — and that they should not rush to restructure voters' rights for political advantage. Oregonians deserve transparency, accountability, and a vote in a general election where turnout is highest.

### **Accountability Matters**

When nearly a quarter of a million voters take time to sign a petition, they do so with clear intentions. They did not sign a petition to push this issue into a lesser-watched May primary; they signed to ensure their voice was heard in the November general election. **Taking that choice away at this stage disrespects their civic engagement** and weakens the initiative and referendum process that is foundational in Oregon law and culture.

### **Conclusion**

For these reasons — clear public intent, constitutional guidance favoring general elections, improved revenue forecasts, and fundamental fairness — I urge the committee to **reject SB 1599** and uphold the referendum process as petitioners intended.

Thank you.



Carmelle Bielenberg,

President & CEO

Albany Area Chamber of Commerce