

To: House Committee on Energy and Environment
RE: HB 2242

Dear Representatives,

According to an analysis of Census data compiled by the state government to implement last year's HB 4006 (see attachment), at least 77 cities across Oregon are facing an extreme housing affordability crisis - defined as 25% or more of tenants spending at least half their income on housing costs.

The largest factor behind this expanding crisis is rapidly rising rents.

But another factor is rising utility costs. Surveys show that low-income Portlanders often find themselves spending 13% of their incomes on utilities alone. Some compensate by cutting their spending on needed services such as food and health care. Others are forced into debt - utility bill payments are the #1 reason given for taking out payday loans in the US, according to the National Consumer Law Center.

When these stopgap measures fail, tenants can find themselves without light, heat or water. Just today, I found myself comforting yet another tenant who had her family's electricity cut off because she could not pay the bills with her fixed income.

Rising utility costs particularly hit tenants who are low-SES, elderly, have disabilities, are raising children, and/or are on fixed incomes.

They also particularly hurt communities of color, who are already most impacted by rising rents and evictions. It is unacceptable that for-profit utility companies are allowed to continuously raise rates for the sake of wealthy investors, while the most vulnerable tenants are quite literally left in the cold.

HB 2242 will go a long way towards addressing these inequities, particularly through creating an Office of the Low-Income and Environmental Justice Advocate within the Oregon Public Utility Commission. Considering differential energy burden, utility cost inequity, and the needs of frontline communities (or "environmental justice communities" in the bill language) when determining utility rates is a long overdue and needed step.

I feel that the bill's language can and should be made stronger in order to achieve its mission. Rather than saying that the Public Utility Commission "may" consider environmental justice and equity issues when determining utility rates (which also implies they may not, and whenever possible WILL NOT given the power of the corporate utility lobby), Section 1 Paragraph (2) of HB 2242 should be amended to say the Public Utility Commission "must" consider them.

There should be a similar change to Section 5 Paragraph (4), which gives the Office of the Low-Income and Environmental Justice Advocate the power to intervene in Public Utility Commission proceedings which could affect the communities the Advocate represents. The proposed bill says the Advocate "may" participate or intervene in these proceedings. This means that, if the staff heading the Office were politicized appointees who opposed the Advocate's stated goals of putting equity needs before corporate profits (again, not at all impossible given the power of the corporate utility lobby in Salem), the Advocate could decline to participate and inequitable decisions could be made with no consideration of low-income tenants or environmental justice communities. This section of HB 2242 should be amended to say the Advocate "must" participate or intervene in Public Utility Commission proceedings which could affect low-income or environmental justice communities.

I would consider these suggestions to be friendly amendments, making the bill more effective at carrying out its vital mission. I strongly encourage the Committee to support HB 2242.

Sincerely,

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Anthony Bencivengo
Portland Tenants United*
Pronouns: They/Them/Theirs
anthony@pdxtu.org

*Organizational affiliation is for identification purposes only