



PORTLAND BUREAU OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Ted Wheeler, Mayor • Mike Myers, Director

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March 5, 2021

Senate Committee on Veterans and Emergency Preparedness
Oregon State Legislature
900 Court Street NE
Salem, Oregon 97301

Re: SB 288

Chair Manning, Vice Chair Thomsen, and members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you yesterday on behalf of the City of Portland. I am entering this letter into the record in support of my oral testimony.

The City of Portland strongly supports SB 288. The current pandemic has highlighted the importance of emergency responders working in partnership with community-based organizations. And we have known for some time that we must also help strengthen the buildings that house these organizations.

I have spent the last year working in the City of Portland's Emergency Coordination Center. Most of my time has been supporting our community through the economic crisis that came along with the pandemic, distributing food boxes, grocery gift cards, toiletries, and cleaning supplies to residents in need. We have seen here in Portland and across the state that those hit hardest by the pandemic have been communities of color, immigrant and refugee communities, and people with disabilities.

In seeking to serve these communities, our most important partners have been community-based organizations. They are already active in many underserved communities, and they have built an infrastructure of relationships and earned trust where government has not. The City literally could not do its job without them. That's why we are enthusiastic in support of formally integrating community partnerships into the state's approach to emergency management.

I've spent the last year on pandemic response, but as an emergency manager in Oregon, pandemic wasn't the disaster I worried most about.

As members of this committee know, Oregon has a significant earthquake risk; there is a 20-37% chance of a subduction zone earthquake here in the next 50 years. That's where much of the focus of emergency management work has been until this year. And although it seems hard to think about right now, our earthquake risk hasn't gone away.



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Unreinforced Masonry Buildings (URMs) pose a grave risk to life in an earthquake. FEMA identifies URM buildings as the structures most likely to collapse or partially collapse. And Restore Oregon estimates that there are between 5,000 and 10,000 URMS in the state. We believe there are about 1,600 in Portland. They include churches, community centers, and subsidized housing that serves our most at-risk residents. The City of Portland explored mandatory seismic retrofits of these buildings, but in the end we concluded that we could not move forward, because the retrofits are expensive and there are no programs that can assist the building owners who would need help most: non-profits and churches that serve primarily communities of color, immigrants, and refugees.

This bill creates an opportunity for those very URM building owners to make their buildings safer. This is an essential step if they are to continue to assist frontline communities after an earthquake – a time when we know they will be needed so badly. That’s why the City is also enthusiastic to support the grant program in SB 288, based on Business Oregon’s successful model of retrofit grants for schools and emergency services. This grant program would provide up to 35% of costs; still requiring organizations to fundraise and do real work to take advantage of the grant, but also providing a meaningful level of support.

For organizations to initiate seismic retrofit projects in the coming biennium, just as we move into stronger economic recovery, is tremendous. Seismic retrofitting work can be completed by most licensed contractors. It employs people locally and it can support small businesses. Now is a great time to begin this work.

Thank you again for considering the benefits of SB 288.

Sincerely,

Jonna Papaefthimiou

Planning, Policy, and Community Programs Manager