

Letter of Testimony in Support of SB 863

Prepared by Ann Eissinger, Oak Creek Valley Community, Corvallis OR

Honorable Senator Wagner, Senator Girod, and all members of the Rules Committee:

I am submitting testimony today in strong support of Senate Bill 863 and I would like to thank Senator Sara Gelser for her sponsorship of this bill.

SB 863 Background

The motivation for SB 863 arose from a group of citizens attempting to fund a badly needed emergency evacuation route for their community with the fundamental goal of saving lives.

The community is the Oak Creek Valley, located northwest of Corvallis Oregon. This wildland-urban-interface (WUI) community has 380 households situated in an 8,000 acre forested basin with only one public egress. Although there is one primitive one-lane evacuation route to the west it is ~4 miles long through thick forest and shared by another community.

The Oak Creek Community's number one safety concern is escape for wildfire!

As the volunteer community wildlife preparedness coordinator, over the past 3 years we have created a community network for emergency fire preparedness, analyzed escape options, and developed an evacuation route plan.

Based on this process, we identified a short, safe route through OSU-state owned pasture land as the best central escape route, and asked Benton County, Corvallis Rural Fire Protection District (CRFPD) and community members to share costs for improvements.

Unfortunately, earlier this year the CRFPD rescinded their support after being advised by the Special District Association of Oregon not to participate in the evacuation route project stating that ["the ORS does not give fire districts the powers to spend money in this way."](#) The lack of statutory authority in the ORS for RFPDs to participate in evacuation route projects is inconsistent with saving lives and providing safe escape from fire which is a firefighter's primary mission.

In order to address this deficit in the ORS, we worked together with Joe Leahy of Leahy-Cox LLP in Springfield and Senator Sara Gelser to develop a legislative fix. From a draft amendment sent to Senator Gelser we are now encouraging your committee to pass SB 863 out of committee so it can move on to the full Senate.

The Bill

Senate Bill 863 simply amends ORS 478.260 by providing explicit language to enable RFPDs to participate in evacuation route development projects. This addresses a gap in the current legislative framework for RFPDs to deal with an urgent and growing need throughout Oregon – that is safe escape from fire.

This is enabling language only - The ORS amendment does not obligate RFPDs to act, but simply provides RFPDs the option to engage in evacuation route projects - if the need arises in their district and if funds are available.

This Bill does not raise taxes. However, it helps create project partnerships, which diversify funding sources and spread out costs for evacuation routes and their maintenance over time.

Larger Issue

The Oak Creek Valley is one of 40 Limited Access Neighborhoods in Benton County. All of these neighborhoods are in need of a risk assessment and some will require evacuation route options. It is clear that similar situations are compounded across the State and that Oak Creek Valley is representative of a much larger issue.

As the danger of large scale wildfire and the need for safe evacuation grows each year, funding options are needed to address these needs. In our search for funding, there were no State or Federal funds available for this type of project. Additionally, there are no dedicated funding sources or lead agencies for evacuation route planning, development or construction.

While many rural towns and counties are struggling to maintain their operations and infrastructure given the challenges of the pandemic, the opportunity to share costs on fire-related projects and improve emergency response and safety would be a benefit for everyone. Providing explicit language in the ORS for Rural Fire Protection Districts to participate in potentially life-saving evacuation route development is greatly needed.

Given the increasing risk of large fast-moving wildfires, even in low-risk western regions as demonstrated in 2020, there is an urgent need to build systems to help Oregonians escape and survive these fires. This includes safe evacuation routes.

I hereby ask you, on behalf of all Oregonians, to support SB 863.