

February 25, 2020

House Committee On Rules  
900 Court St. NE  
Salem, Oregon 97301

Re: HB 2168 Establishing Juneteenth as a legal state holiday.

Multnomah County was among the first, if not the first, local government to designate Juneteenth as a holiday for our employees, it's a single, small step toward acknowledging the fullness of the layered history and the lived experience of Black people in this country, especially our Black colleagues.

A deeper appreciation of what Juneteenth is can help us understand why it demands to be held up alongside other holidays like Memorial Day and Independence Day. Although the Emancipation Proclamation, which declared enslaved people in the rebelling Confederate states as free, was signed in 1863, slaveholders in these states continued the abhorrent practice even as the Civil War drew to a close. The news about the end of slavery traveled slowly throughout the South, leaving slaves throughout parts of the country without the freedom they had been granted.

On June 19, 1865, Gen. Gordon Granger of the Union army finally brought the news of emancipation to Galveston, Tex., ordering that the thousands who continued to live in bondage be officially freed.

This is the moment that Juneteenth celebrates — when emancipation finally liberated Black enslaved people in the westernmost Confederate state two years after the Civil War had ended, and two years after President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation.

But Juneteenth reflects more than what happened on that day. It is an observance recognizing Black liberation: liberation that was delayed in 1865 and remains deferred for millions of Black Americans by systemic oppression and racism, the progress that has been made since emancipation in the face of structural inequities, and the resilience and strength of Black people who continue to fight for true and full liberation.

Juneteenth is undeniably a celebration, but it's also a reminder of the work that's been done to tear down systems of oppression, and a call to engage in the work that remains ahead. This call — not just to the Black community, but to all non-Black people — today sounds as loudly as it ever has. And people across the country are answering through demonstrations and protests, advocacy, and direct assistance.

Making Juneteenth a paid holiday is one way the County is responding. And if we seek to truly honor the historic and current struggle, we must continue to inform our actions by listening, learning, and seeking out ways to support each other.

The Multnomah County Board of Commissioners encourages the State Legislature to follow suit by passing HB 2168 and make Juneteenth a state holiday.



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