

Submitter: Whitney Bailey
On Behalf Of:
Committee: Senate Committee On Rules
Measure: SB775

Chair Lieber and Committee Members,

As the Senior Urban Conservationist of the East Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District, I urge you to support SB 775. More than 90% of the constituents I serve, and the taxpayers who support our work (myself included), are urban residents who do not qualify to run for a seat on our Board of Directors, and therefore whose concerns and communities are not represented in our leadership.

Instead, each election, these taxpayers have no choice but to select from the incredibly small candidate pool formed by the small percentage of landowners in our District who both manage over 10 acres and also have the capacity for and interest in holding public office. While we have been fortunate in the quality of those candidates over the years, the taxpayers of Multnomah County deserve greater choice and more diverse representation than current eligibility requirements allow.

The path to eligibility through the Associate Director position has been presented as an existing solution, but it is not sufficient. Associate Directors are chosen by elected Board members, in effect allowing current Boards to hand-pick their successors. While it is theoretically possible for them to choose Associate Directors who represent diverse communities, urban sustainability expertise, and marginalized groups, there is currently neither incentive nor mandate to do so. Under the current system, an outcome that needs to become the norm remains, instead, unlikely at best. Absent a requirement that Boards reflect the make-up of their constituents, expanding the number of Associate Board positions or changing Zone lines does not fix this issue.

A concern has been expressed that opening up eligibility to all residents will allow members of fringe political groups to seize the opportunity to run for public office in order to further their own political agendas. This is true--just as it is for *every* election. Right now our pool of eligible candidates is so small that many of our Board members run for election uncontested. EMSWCD has been very fortunate so far in those who have chosen to run, because owning 10 acres is no proof against extremism. Increasing the pool of eligible candidates would actually *decrease* that risk because it would greatly *increase* the number of *highly* qualified candidates. A core tenet of democracy is that voters are trusted to choose the best candidate out of the slate presented to them. Greater choice can only mean higher quality outcomes.

Another argument against this measure is that SWCD Board members bring important and necessary natural resource expertise to their positions, and are responsible for sharing that expertise among the communities they represent. Again, the very fact that this is true actually *supports* removing the 10-acre requirement for highly urbanized districts. Boards need to have expertise in the issues that most affect their constituents, and should have connections among the communities they serve. Mostly agricultural Districts would not be best served by Boards made up primarily of urban storm water professionals, any more than mostly urban Districts are currently best served by Boards made up primarily of agricultural professionals.

In Districts serving primarily urban populations, the current 10-acre eligibility requirement serves no purpose other than to deny people representation. This is antithetical to the needs of these constituents, and to the values of representative democracy. Please support SB 775.

Thank you for your attention to and consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,

Whitney Bailey
Senior Urban Conservationist
EMSWCD