

June 20, 2023

Testimony against SB775 regarding providing that zone directors on local governing body of soil and water conservation district must (only) reside within zones they represent in (a) district and be registered voters, stripping away requirements to own land and/or be involved in conservation.

Soil and Water Conservation Districts were formed to provide help to local landowners in conserving, improving and saving the soil and water that provides food for this nation. When formed it was decided that each local district needed knowledgeable representation on the ground to represent the farmers and landowners.

This bill strips away some basic qualifications, not everyone has worked the land, not everyone understands the dynamic changes that can take place in an ever changing landscape. People whose families have worked the land, invested generations in trying to keep the land in good shape, learning new idea's every year and many times implementing them on a shoe-string have a life time investment in what they do, and a skill set that cannot be duplicated. They take the time and make the effort to make sure that their districts are doing a good job to help everyone, not just landowners. Conserving the soil and keeping water clean in the rural area's provides good water to everyone downstream.

Thus the current requirements that zone directors of Soil and Water Conservation Districts need to have a background in agriculture, own or manage a minimum of 10 acres of property, and have conservation plan. There are ways that at-large folks who own less than 10 acres can qualify to serve on boards. One year of serving as an associate director and having a conservation plan written by the Soil and Water Conservation District is all it takes. Every Board has to have at least two At-Large Directors, but even folks who live in a zone can qualify to run for a zone position using the same method. At-Large Directors do not need to own 10 acres of property, but a background in conservation work, or education are always a plus.

Taking away the qualifications of on the ground knowledge means that big business, people with deep pockets, can run campaigns that rural people cannot compete with. People's who want to build a resume of elected office and have no real interest in conservation, etc. This bill is poorly written, does not represent all of Oregon, and limits local representation for these boards.

I understand that Multnomah County has difficulty fulfilling their district boards due to a lack of agricultural land. If this bill was limited to just Multnomah County this would be a different issue.

I am opposed to SB775 the way it is written, the short turnaround time, and the fact that the bill had its first hearing with no public posting of the hearing, a violation of public meeting laws.

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