

June 21, 2023

To: House Rules Committee

Re: SB 775 Soil and Water Conservation District Board Eligibility

Dear Chair Fahey and Committee Members:

I am submitting this letter of support for SB 775, which would update the eligibility rules for soil and water conservation districts so that candidates for zoned seats in districts with populations of over 250,000 are not required to own or manage at least 10 acres of land. I believe it is a long overdue update to the current statute and would improve diversity, representation, and involvement in the important work of soil and water conservation districts (SWCDs).

I live in Senate District 4/House District 7 within the Upper Willamette Soil and Water Conservation District.

I have worked on or helped manage small farms for nearly a decade and I find it startling to realize that all but one of those farms is under the arbitrary 10 acre threshold that would enable me to run for a zoned seat. Despite these farms being local businesses and playing an important role in providing jobs and feeding the local community, the current statute has the effect of excluding all those involved in them from representation and full participation. Considering that there are no restrictions to run for other special districts, such as school boards or fire districts, the change proposed in SB 775 is important for encouraging civic engagement and democratic participation. The frequent vacancies on SWCD boards hint at the barriers to candidacy and the need for this change.

In addition, as someone who lives in an urban area, I see that there are a number of issues that SWCDs address which are specific to more densely populated regions. There are concerns around stormwater management, pesticide and herbicide use in yards, drought tolerant landscaping, urban trees and mitigating a heat island effect. As we anticipate future challenges in the face of extreme weather, population growth, increasing costs of living, and continued urbanization, a diversity of perspectives and experiences is critical to finding solutions together.

I believe soil and water conservation districts have an important role to play. Updating the candidate eligibility rules would go a long way toward helping our communities be more nimble, resilient, and successful.

Thank you in advance for your support of this change,

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