

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

Chair Fahey and Committee Members,

As the Senior Urban Conservationist of the East Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District, I urge you to support SB 775 and remove the 10-acre land ownership/management eligibility requirement for citizens who wish to run for office as members of our Board of Directors. More than 90% of the constituents I serve, and the taxpayers who support our work (myself included), are urban residents with small properties who currently do not qualify to run. This creates a fundamental mismatch between our Board and the communities they serve.

Each election, urban taxpayers have no choice but to select from the incredibly small candidate pool of rural landowners 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 and historically marginalized groups, and who bring expertise in urban sustainability, there is currently neither incentive nor mandate to do so. Under the current system, an outcome that needs to be the norm remains, instead, unlikely at best. Absent a requirement that Boards must reflect the geographic and demographic characteristics 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 extremist members of fringe political groups to seize the opportunity to run for public office in order to further their own political agendas. This is a risk in *every* election, and there is nothing about owning 10 acres that guarantees political moderation. Right now Multnomah County's pool of eligible candidates is extremely small, and EMSWCD has simply been fortunate (so far) in those who have chosen to run for office. Increasing the pool of eligible candidates would actually *decrease* the risk of extremist elements taking over, 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 represent the communities they serve. Mostly agricultural Districts would not be best served by Boards made up primarily of urban sustainability 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