



May 22, 2023

To: Senate Rules Committee

From: Bob Sallinger, Willamette Riverkeeper

Re: SB 775 Soil and Water Conservation District Board Eligibility

Dear Chair Lieber and Senate Rules Committee Members,

On behalf of Willamette Riverkeeper, I would like to submit this letter of support for SB 775. SB 775 seeks to update the eligibility rules for soil and water conservation districts so candidates for zoned seats in districts with populations of over 250,000 do not have to own or manage at least 10 acres of land. We believe this is a long overdue update to the current statute. Willamette Riverkeeper operates throughout the 11,500 square mile Willamette River Watershed which encompasses multiple SWCDs.

The current statute that limits eligible candidates for zoned seats to those who own or manage at least 10 acres does not realistically address the needs of Soil and Water districts with larger populations and significant urban considerations when making policy decisions regarding soil and water health. Several of the districts within the Willamette Valley fit this description. Allowing districts with populations of over 250,000, will allow those districts to attract a larger pool of qualified applicants and better address priority issues including not only agricultural impacts but also challenges such as stormwater runoff, development impacts, green infrastructure (tree canopy, green roofs, green streets, etc.), green development, naturescaping, urban ag, protection of urban surface water resources (wetlands, floodplains, stream corridors, etc.) Expanding the applicant pool will better allow SWCDs to recruit people with expertise in engaging urban populations. Expanding the applicant pool will also increase the potential to attract more diverse candidates to serve on boards, which is essential to advance equity objectives.

On a personal note, I served in a district seat for East Multnomah SWCD for two terms. I was able to run despite not owning ten acres of land because I was willing to serve for a year as a non-voting associate director (this is an alternate pathway under current state law). In both of

my two election cycles, I ran entirely unopposed. I firmly believed then and continue to believe now that this restrictive system needs to be replaced. We should not be creating intentional barriers for people to run for office. These positions are time consuming, challenging and unpaid (albeit very rewarding). It is difficult to find people with the time, resources and skills to be viable candidates. It makes sense to remove unnecessary barriers in order to attract the broadest possible range of strong and diverse candidates.

Thank you for your consideration,

Bob Sallinger
Urban Conservation Director
Willamette Riverkeeper