

Submitter: Ben Riggsby
On Behalf Of:
Committee: Senate Committee On Rules
Measure: SB775

May 21, 2023

To: Senate Rules Committee

Re: SB 775 Soil and Water Conservation District Board Eligibility

Chair Lieber and Committee Members,

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 counties with populations of over 250,000 do not have to own or manage at least 10 acres of land. I believe this is a long overdue update to the current statute.

There are several reasons I support this legislation:

Placing election eligibility requirements on potential candidates that are almost entirely dependent on wealth (and likely generational wealth) is antithetical to a free and fair society. It is remarkable that such a requirement still exists in Oregon. Oregon has, over the last few decades, made excellent progress rooting out troubling language and policies that arose from less equitable times in our state's past. There is a clear, direct line between those efforts and this bill.

The 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 and taxing decisions regarding soil and water health.

SB 775 only impacts six soil and water conservation districts in Oregon because it only applies to counties with a population of over 250,000; recognizing that smaller more rural districts where the potential for owning or managing 10 acres is more realistic. It is a reasonable compromise that responds to actual needs.

There is a chronic issue of vacancies on these important boards. If there were a lot of

people running for these seats, this might not be as big an issue. However, that's not the case. As a matter of fact, SWCD's are long known for having the same people sitting on their boards for decades because they can't find another qualified candidate to run for their seats given the current restrictions.

There are no restrictions to run for any other special districts such as school boards, fire districts, etc., who are using public tax dollars in open elections on the ballot. I don't believe that the current restrictions on who can run for the public office of Soil and Water Conservation District is right or ethical.

Thank you,

Ben Riggsby