

March 28th, 2025

House Economic Development, Small Business, and Trade committee



Re: Please Support the -2 amendments to HB 2291

Dear Chair Nguyen, Vice-Chairs Diehl and Isadore and members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HB 2291.

I am writing in strong support of HB 2291 with the -2 amendments. As the Executive Director of Human Access Project (HAP), we are excited to join as partners with Portland Winter Lights Festival, Waterfront Blues Festival, Rose Festival, and Portland Metro Chamber to collaboratively work to drive downtown foot traffic and economic and cultural vitality for the City of Portland. Not only will this bill be a catalyst for downtown economic recovery, it's a clear demonstration of the business community seeing benefit from a healthy, swimmable Willamette River.

This public, private, non-profit coalition has worked collaboratively the past two years to successfully drive significant, measurable [growth in visitor traffic and hotel occupancy back to downtown](#) through events and festivals. This is a proven strategy, and the heart of that success is the festivals and river events that are part of Portland's cultural heritage. The improvement in public perceptions around the Willamette River has been verified in an exponential increase of use, voter sentiment and downtown business support.

It is a common misconception that the City of Portland funds these events and contracts with outside event companies to produce them. In truth, it is the exact opposite. Portland Winter Lights Festival, Waterfront Blues Festival, Rose Festival and HAP were founded, produced, and built by small, family-owned businesses and non-profits, often running on tight budgets while carrying the entire financial risk. These are, by and large, independently produced events that pay the city for the use of Waterfront Park and cover costs for street management to transport infrastructure such as bathrooms, power, and security.

Like all cities and events, the combination of the pandemic, decreased foot traffic, dramatically increased costs, and the lack of modern infrastructure at Waterfront Park have put signature events on the [financial edge](#). HB 2291 will provide one-time grants to stabilize these major events and establish a grant fund that events throughout the city may apply for.

HB 2291 will also establish a process to study the modernization of the operation and management of Waterfront Park and river access. This is essential to putting our major festivals back on a sustainable growth trajectory. The study process will examine best practices from peer waterfront cities including successful public - private independent management models such as World Festivals Incorporated in Milwaukee, WI and Friends of Waterfront Park in Seattle. By establishing this stakeholder process with the national policy consensus center, HB 2291 recognizes that Portland must transform Waterfront Park and access and connection to the Willamette River into ongoing, year-round, economic and cultural drivers.

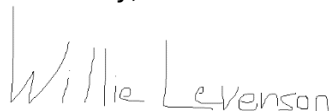
HAP is a nonprofit organization based in Portland, Oregon. The mission of HAP is Transforming Portland's Relationship with the Willamette River. Our vision is a City in Love with its River. HAP has one of the strongest water-based nonprofit Board teams in the State of Oregon. Our role in the community is catalyzing cultural change around how people feel about and interact with the Willamette River. We want the community to view the Willamette River as an asset, something to be valued and protected. We want to foster and drive a connection between the people of Portland and the river that runs through our community. As such, our goals include improving Willamette River edge spaces for recreation, developing creative activation/programming around these spaces, fostering environmental stewardship, community investment and connection with these spaces, and identifying and removing barriers to people feeling comfortable interacting with the Willamette River. Since 2010, HAP has driven the opening of seven Willamette River swimming areas in Portland (including catalyzing the replacement of the Cathedral Park Dock and repurposing the Kevin Duckworth Dock as a swimming dock), brought over 35,000 people to the Willamette River through events, and have removed nearly 500 tons of concrete and riprap from river beaches and access spaces.

HAP is grateful to the committee for recognizing the economic and cultural importance of these Portland events and how devastating it would be to lose one or more of them, especially when their importance has never been clearer. When the business and event community see value in a healthy, accessible Willamette River, it drives broad, positive cultural change in the community around how people feel about the river.

Jacques Cousteau said it well, "People protect what they love." Beyond all of the clear economic benefits, this bill is an investment in building love and care for our river. It's also a clear signal of the business community seeing benefit from a healthy, swimmable Willamette River.

Many thanks in advance for consideration of support of HB 2291 with the -2 amendments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Willie Levenson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Willie Levenson
Executive Director
Human Access Project