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April 4, 2025

Oregon House of Representatives

Committee on Higher Education and Workforce Development

900 Court St. NE, H-484

Salem, Oregon 97301

RE: Support for House Bill 3552 - Regional Career Centers Funding

Chair Hudson, Vice Chair Fragala, Vice Chair Harbick, and Members of the Committee,

On behalf of the Board of Directors and full membership, the Columbia Economic Team (CET) commits its unconditional support for House Bill 3552, which would allocate \$156.4 million to support the creation and operation of Regional Career Centers (RCCs) for the 2025-27 biennium. The need and demand exist; we have the data to prove it.

As the singular economic development organization serving Columbia County, CET's mission is to promote the creation, retention, growth, and attraction of business and industry throughout our county. Our work in business recruitment, workforce development, and small business support has given us firsthand insight into our region's critical workforce challenges.

In 2024, CET conducted an extensive Business Community Connection Project that surveyed and interviewed 75 businesses across our county. The results were clear and compelling: career technical education in high schools emerged as the #1 suggested and requested economic solution among business owners. This finding speaks directly to the urgent need that HB 3552 addresses.

The funding proposed in this bill would be transformative for Columbia County in several key ways:

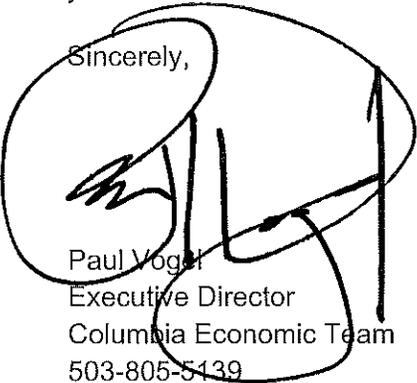
1. **Connecting Education to Industry:** This bill would provide a full-time youth workforce development coordinator, bridging the crucial gap between classroom learning and workplace application—a missing link we've identified in our business outreach.
2. **Building Career Pathways:** RCCs would allow for coordinated planning and deployment of resources to develop meaningful career pathways for students, addressing the skilled labor shortage consistently identified as a top challenge by our local businesses.
3. **Expanding Access to CTE:** The development and enhancement of facilities would increase access to advanced career development opportunities for students across our rural county, where such resources are currently limited.
4. **Supporting Business Growth:** By creating a pipeline of skilled workers, this initiative directly supports business retention and expansion - core functions of our economic development mission.

Our county's manufacturing, healthcare, construction, and technical sectors desperately need skilled workers. The findings from our economic development work consistently show that businesses struggle to find qualified employees with technical skills and workplace readiness. RCCs would directly address this challenge by coordinating internships, apprenticeships, and work-based learning opportunities with local businesses, developing a quality, experienced talent supply chain – from our own communities.

The Columbia Economic Team is committed to supporting this initiative through our business networks, industry partnerships, and economic development resources. We stand ready to collaborate with education partners to ensure these Regional Career Centers meet the needs of both students and employers across all our communities.

We respectfully urge your support for HB 3552 and the \$156.4 million investment in Regional Career Centers. This funding represents both an investment in education and a critical workforce development strategy that will strengthen our local economy and create pathways to prosperity for Columbia County's youth.

Sincerely,



Paul Vogel
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