

Senate Committee on Finance & Revenue

TO: Chair Mark Hass and members of the committee

FROM: Russ Dondero

Since I can't attend this hearing, I am writing for the record in support of SB 1545.

Currently, Oregon has 28 special districts from issues ranging from irrigation to parks, recreation to health.

Senate Bill 1545 would establish a new type of special district that would authorize local communities to levy property taxes to fund children's services outside of school time.

"Children's services" are broadly defined so that they can be customized to meet the community's needs for their children.

In Washington County advocates for children have worked for several years to persuade our county commission to support a county levy for children's services. However, a 3-2 majority has refused to put a county levy on the ballot favoring abating property tax dollars to the traded sector instead.

Senate Bill 1545 creates a "local option" for communities which can step up to the needs of making a more robust non-school based children services program.

In the Forest Grove, Cornelius, Gaston and Banks area the need for such a program is illustrated by the high rates of children living in poverty – in both incorporated and unincorporated areas of Western Washington County.

21% of children in Forest Grove live in poverty;
57% of children in District 15 get free or reduced lunches'
40% of workers in Washington County work at low wage jobs;

These statistics belie the image of Washington County as the so-called "economic engine of Oregon." The fact is there are two Washington Counties as there are two Oregon's – one doing well, the other struggling to make ends meet.

Such an optional "local levy" would enable residents to step up to the needs of children in their areas.

It builds on the idea of other types of special districts – ESDs, fire districts, local PUDs and park districts.

I would suggest that the bill be amended to allow within the rubric of a children’s special district inclusion of funding programs to help families at risk of homelessness since children in need come from families in need.

Thus far this bill has received comment from the city of Beaverton which opposes this measure because it duplicates services offered in Beaverton. That is probably true but not relevant.

This is not a mandatory but a local option. Residents of Beaverton are benefitted by other special districts such as TVF&R and the Tualatin Hills Park & Recreation District, the largest special district in Oregon.

They also note concern about such a levy eating into the county library system.

This is a more valid concern only because of the unintended consequences of Measures 5, 46 and 50 which this body has refused to deal with for decades – the so-called tax compression issue.

More to the point, while residents of incorporated Washington County have such services, the capacity of local support varies from community to community and leaves out residents of unincorporated Washington County.

In sum, if our county commissioners would simply allow a county levy vote, none of this would be necessary. Or if the legislature addressed the negative impacts of Measure 5, 46 and 50 – such local options would not be necessary.

But for now – children and their families are in need while we wait for those in power to feel the “fierce urgency of now.”

Sincerely,

Russell A. Dondero
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