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Oregon State Legislature
900 Court St. NE
Salem, OR 97301

Subject: Opposition to HB 2138, Section 22 (1)(f) – Preservation of Historic Neighborhoods

Dear Members of the Oregon State Legislature,

I am writing to express my strong opposition to Section 22 (1)(f) of HB 2138, which proposes the repeal of demolition review requirements for homes listed on the National Register of Historic Places. As a resident of the Laurelhurst neighborhood in Portland, I share the broader goals of HB 2138 in addressing housing accessibility and affordability. However, removing demolition review for historic properties is a misguided policy that threatens Portland's cultural heritage, economic stability, and environmental sustainability.

The Role of Demolition Review in Responsible Growth

Demolition review provides a balanced approach to urban development, ensuring that historic preservation aligns with housing and community growth goals. This process is not a blanket restriction against demolition but a safeguard that evaluates factors such as historical significance, neighborhood impact, and potential alternatives. Without this oversight, Portland risks losing its historic districts to indiscriminate redevelopment that prioritizes short-term profit over long-term community stability.

Economic and Housing Market Implications

Contrary to the assumption that removing demolition review will enhance housing affordability, experience in cities like Seattle and San Francisco has demonstrated the opposite effect. Developers often target historic neighborhoods like Laurelhurst, replacing smaller, more affordable homes with high-end luxury residences. This process leads to rising property values, increased housing costs, and the displacement of middle-income families—exacerbating, rather than solving, Portland's housing crisis.

Laurelhurst provides a strong example of “density without demolition.” Since its designation as a historic district in 2019, the neighborhood has added 13 new accessory dwelling units (ADUs), with a total of 45 permitted. These additions have increased available housing without erasing the architectural and cultural character that makes Laurelhurst unique. Encouraging such infill development should be prioritized over policies that incentivize demolition.

The Cultural and Economic Value of Historic Neighborhoods

Historic neighborhoods are not just remnants of the past; they are vital economic and cultural assets. Heritage tourism is a significant economic driver, with visitors drawn to Portland's distinctive historic districts contributing to local businesses, restaurants, and cultural institutions. The National Trust for Historic Preservation notes that heritage tourists spend significantly more per trip than the average traveler, reinforcing the economic argument for preservation.

Moreover, historic neighborhoods like Laurelhurst contribute to Portland's identity, offering a sense of place that modern developments often fail to replicate. The architectural styles found in Laurelhurst—Colonial Revival, Craftsman, and English Cottage—are irreplaceable cultural artifacts that strengthen Portland's reputation as a vibrant, historic city.

Environmental Consequences of Demolition

Demolishing historic buildings is not only a cultural and economic loss but also an environmental hazard. The destruction of century-old homes results in excessive landfill waste, the loss of embodied carbon, and the release of hazardous materials like lead and asbestos. According to studies, demolition of a typical single-family home generates approximately 126 metric tons of carbon emissions.

Furthermore, demolition often leads to the loss of mature trees, which provide crucial urban canopy coverage, reducing heat islands and improving air quality. Portland's sustainability goals, as outlined in the 2035 Comprehensive Plan and recent legislation like HB 3409, emphasize reducing emissions and promoting building reuse. Repealing demolition review directly contradicts these environmental objectives.

A Pragmatic Alternative: Preservation with Purpose

Rather than eliminating demolition review, lawmakers should pursue policies that encourage adaptive reuse and thoughtful urban planning. Key alternatives include:

- **Incentivizing ADU construction and multi-unit conversions** to increase housing density without demolishing historic structures.
- **Providing financial incentives for the preservation and adaptive reuse of historic homes**, making restoration a viable alternative to demolition.
- **Requiring affordability benchmarks for demolition approvals**, ensuring that new developments contribute to diverse and inclusive housing stock.

Conclusion

I urge the Oregon State Legislature to amend HB 2138 by removing Section 22 (1)(f) and preserving the demolition review process for homes listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Historic preservation and housing expansion are not mutually exclusive goals; they can coexist through thoughtful policy decisions that prioritize responsible development. By

maintaining demolition review, Portland can continue to grow while safeguarding its historic and cultural legacy.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I appreciate your leadership in addressing Oregon's housing challenges and urge you to protect the integrity of our historic neighborhoods.

Sincerely,

George Kurtyka
Resident, Laurelhurst Neighborhood
Portland, Oregon