

February 7, 2024

To the Members of the Committee:

I'm writing in opposition to SB 1537 as it is currently written. Though there are many useful elements in the bill, the proposal to amend Urban Growth Boundaries (UGBs) for cities with no showing of need, no connection between the housing proposed and the specific affordable housing needs of the community, and no attention to the impact on our neediest households stemming from creating needed housing in marginal locations makes the bill fatally flawed.

Urban growth boundaries were turned to in Oregon in the 1970s as a means for calling a halt to scattered, uncoordinated, urban growth that was both difficult for cities and counties to service efficiently and in direct conflict with established farm and forest uses, and broader conservation aims. This kind of scattershot development is known as "urban sprawl" and it is typical of urban development patterns throughout the US.

Once a decision is made to designate land for urban development it is lost to farm and forest use forever. Urban market pressures and land management practices quickly take over. Soils and ecosystems that have taken thousands and millions of years to develop are never reclaimed once sprawl overtakes them.

Fortunately, urban growth boundaries have proven to be remarkably effective at curbing sprawl. No other state has been able to tame sprawl like Oregon has, and few other places in the world have been able to meld natural resource use and conservation with needed urban development as has occurred in our state.

With no evidence that urban growth boundaries stand in the way of needed housing development, SB 1537 is proposing to make available urban growth boundary amendments to every city in Oregon. Why do we have a housing crisis in Oregon? Many reasons, but few of them unique to Oregon and none reliably linked to our use of UGBs and land planning to stop sprawl.

Perhaps most concerning, SB 1537 allows cities throughout Oregon to amend their urban growth boundaries with no specific demonstration of a need for more *land*. SB 1537 creates the loophole of all loopholes by giving cities the greenlight to seek additional urban land without actually demonstrating that additional land is tied to the type and cost of housing actually needed.

Building affordable housing in locations lacking services, transportation, and parks, libraries, and schools only creates more expensive problems for those households needing those amenities and services at hand. At \$4-\$5 dollars for a gallon of gas, locating housing in unaffordable locations only adds to the challenges facing Oregon's families today.

SB 1537 really benefits those engaged in assembling the land for development. With the stroke of a pen, land brought into an urban growth boundary receives a dramatic boost in value. However, rather than capturing at least some of that new value to provide needed infrastructure, SB 1537 both gives that new value to the speculators and makes them eligible for grants and loans of public money.

If sprawl was such a remarkable gift to those seeking housing, then the housing crisis would be Oregon's alone. It's not. Housing production shortages and affordability crises have been documented coast to coast. Seeking a solution to our housing crisis through what has failed elsewhere can be due to only two things: either a willingness to ignore facts, or a desire to do something, anything, despite the very real prospect of failure.

We can and must do better. The fix isn't in yet. SB 1537 has a lot of worthwhile elements but those pertaining to UGBs are not among them. We should expect good and innovative changes to SB 1537. First, proposed urban growth boundary amendments should not be used to shoot holes through Oregon's sprawl busting legacy. If there is a need for land, then show it, prove it, and leave the existing law alone.

Second, require that affordable housing be created in locations that count for households of limited means. Random additions to jurisdictions statewide is not an informed or helpful strategy.

Third, accelerate the implementation of zoning reforms already adopted by the state. Invest directly in needed housing types in good locations rather than on the margins of jurisdictions least likely to enable households in need of affordable housing to get ahead.

Fourth, recognize that Metro's boundary is out of date. In the 1970s, fifty years ago, Metro's boundary was drawn to literally surround the urban development that existed at that time in Multnomah, Washington, and Clackamas counties. Today, the metropolitan economy is making every community in those counties part of the functional Metro area, and SB 1537 could fix this.

I have no doubt that the framers of SB 1537 really care about housing. However, as written, SB 1537 is unacceptable and needs work. Removing the unwarranted UGB amendments from the bill would go a long way to making it both acceptable and useful.

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