

# Oregon Historical Society Local Option Levy Multnomah County 2026-27 Tax Hearing Minutes

Thursday, April 23, 2026

11:00 a.m.

Multnomah Building 501 SE Hawthorne Blvd.  
Portland, Oregon

## Present:

### TSCC:

Chair Matt Donahue (attended via Zoom),  
Vice Chair Dr. Rita Moore,  
Commissioner Tod Burton,  
Commissioner Dr. Will Terry,  
Commissioner Erik Kvarsten,  
Executive Director Allegra Willhite,  
Budget Analyst Brittanie Abayare

### Absent: None

### Multnomah County Board of Commissioners:

Vince Jones Dixon, Multnomah County Vice Chair  
Diane McKeel, Co-chair of the Levy Oversight Committee  
Kerry Tymchuk, Executive Director of the Oregon Historical Society (OHS)  
Janice Dilg, Co-chair of the Levy Oversight Committee

## Opening Remarks and Introductions

Vice Chair Dr. Rita Moore opened the hearing and welcomed attendees to the public hearing for the Multnomah County Oregon Historical Society Local Option Levy Tax Measure. She stated that the TSCC is a community oversight commission that conducts budget reviews and holds public hearings to give the public an opportunity to learn about proposed tax measures.

Vice Chair Moore clarified that the TSCC does not take any action or advocate for a position on the measure, and that the hearing is strictly for information sharing.

The commissioners and staff then introduced themselves, confirming that none had any conflicts of interest regarding the county or the historical society.

## Public Comment

Tom Busse, Treasurer of the Libertarian Party of Oregon and Government Accountant

- Stated he is the treasurer of the Libertarian Party of Oregon and a government accountant. He objected to the hearing's timing, arguing under ORS 294.655 that it should have occurred before the March 23rd deadline for the ballot handbook. He claimed asking questions today is pointless. He alleged that the county ballot handbook has incorrect information. Furthermore, he argued there are structural problems with TSCC, that it needs more authority to address the

cumulative tax burden and local income taxes, and warned of a regional "doom loop". He suggested a comprehensive approach to cultural and arts funding. Busse also claimed the tax measure is illegal under ORS 351.180, arguing the state preempts the county levy to 0.25 cents per mill, rather than the 0.5 cents implied by the measure. Finally, he criticized the county's handling of public records requests and suggested the commission get rid of itself.

Vice Chair Moore thanked him for his testimony and noted it would be entered into the public meeting record.

## Commissioner Questions and District Responses

**Question 1: Asked by Commissioner Burton:** We'd love to hear a little more about the history of this local option levy – what was the impetus for the county putting forth the levy? How did this partnership come about?

**Answered by Vince Jones Dixon:**

- He explained that the Oregon Historical Society was facing severe financial challenges in 2009 and 2010. Aware that a good share of OHS collections relate to the history of Multnomah County and its cities, county commissioners began discussions with the OHS board of trustees and supporters around funding options. The commissioners subsequently approved a 5-year levy at 5 cents per every thousand of assessed value to be placed on the November 2010 ballot. The levy language included specific provisions: financial support for four East Multnomah County historical societies (East County Historical Organization, Crown Point Country Historical Society, Troutdale Historical Society, and Gresham Historical Society); the creation of a citizens levy oversight committee; a charge that OHS and the four East County historical organizations create and share exhibitions and programs representing Multnomah County's diverse population; a commitment to the OHS museum being open at least 47 hours per week and the research library being open at least 32 hours per week; and a requirement offering free admission to Multnomah County residents. The measure passed in 2010 with 54% of the vote, and was subsequently renewed in 2016 and 2021 with 71% and 78% of the vote respectively.

**Follow up question: Asked by Commissioner Burton:** How are you communicating with voters about this levy?

**Answered by Diane McKeel:**

- Outreach is being done through the voters' pamphlet, the [yesfororegonhistory.org](https://www.yesfororegonhistory.org) website, media interviews, public speaking, digital advertising, and organic posts on Facebook and Instagram. Between campaigns, OHS includes messaging in its materials highlighting that free admission for county residents is thanks to taxpayer support.

**Question 2: Asked by Commissioner Terry:** The 2010 levy was designed to cover roughly 50% of OHS operations. Today it accounts for approximately one-third of operating expenses. What can you tell us about the current state of your financial situation, and how has it evolved since 2010?

**Answered by Kerry Tymchuk:**

- In compliance with the levy language, OHS provides audited annual financials to the levy oversight committee, which are then posted on the county's website. The audits reflect that the levy has worked as intended, as the stable operating funding has returned OHS to financial stability and allowed it to better fulfill its central mission of preservation, access, and education. The 2025 audit was completed to the highest standard, receiving an unqualified approval opinion from the auditors. Furthermore, stable operating funding has allowed OHS to create a reserve fund used to fund deferred maintenance and special projects supporting their mission and strategic plan. It has also encouraged private donors to step forward, including for the creation of the Boiyle family executive director endowment, which provides a steady, ongoing funding stream to offset general operating expenses. He also noted that the levy funding is critical to the survival of the four East County societies.

**Question 3: Asked by Commissioner Kvarsten:** The decrease in downtown foot traffic has impacted a lot of businesses and organizations? How OHS is fairing and what are some things you've done to try to address that?

**Answered by Kerry Tymchuk:**

- Attendance for school tours and public programs are very strong. Post-pandemic, they introduced revised school tours that align with new state standards for educators, as well as bilingual tours. These changes are enormously popular, resulting in tours being booked months in advance with a waiting list; most of these tours are for Multnomah County schools. Public programs are a mix of internally generated content and partnership programs, and almost all programs at the downtown location are free of charge. These are scheduled on weekday evenings, noontimes, and weekend afternoons, regularly drawing standing room only crowds. Program topics are diverse, including celebrating 50 years of Oregon's Vietnamese community, commemorating the leadership of Minoru Yasui, and launching digital resources like the Albina Music Trust community archives and the APANO's Behind the Wok project. By providing these high-quality, welcoming tours, events, and exhibits, audiences have broadened at rates and sizes that meet or exceed pre-pandemic numbers.

**Follow-up Question: Asked by Commissioner Kvarsten:** What have you been doing to encourage additional attendance?

**Answered by Kerry Tymchuk:**

- He noted that museum attendance, specifically downtown, has been slower to recover. They encourage visitation through paid advertising with local media outlets, organic social media communications, a weekly e-digest sent to over 22,000 subscribers, and a range of community events and partnerships. Additionally, they have significantly amplified their digital reach and have seen increased engagement specifically with Multnomah County residents. OHS maintains four digital history resources, two digital collection websites, and their overarching ohs.org website, which provide free educational resources to students and learners. In 2024, these platforms recorded over 1.3 million visitors,

with over 20% of the ohs.org traffic coming from Multnomah County users. They are also set to debut an innovative new website by fall of 2026 entirely dedicated to sharing Portland's history through digitized collections and imaginative technology. She also highlighted a new permanent exhibit on Portland's history called "Rivers Roses and Rip City," which opened a year and a half ago and is very popular with Portland schools.

**Question 4: Asked by Vice Chair Moore:** Please tell us a bit about the levy oversight committee - how are the members chosen? And what are the primary functions of the levy oversight committee?

**Answered by Janice Dilg:**

- Members of the Levy Oversight Committee (LOC) are appointed by Multnomah County Commissioners. The current committee consists of co-chairs Diane McKeel and herself (Janice Dilg), alongside six other members. Per the levy language, the LOC meets at least twice annually, usually at the Oregon Historical Society. They also tour the four East County historical organizations approximately once a year, and those four organizations are required to provide semi-annual summaries of their expenses.

**Follow-up Question: Asked by Commissioner Moore:** Can you provide an example of a decision you've made based on feedback from the committee?

**Answered by Janice Dilg:**

- Throughout the history of the LOC, commissioners have consistently made clear to OHS and the East County Historical Organizations the importance of programs and exhibitions that reflect Multnomah County's diverse population. In response to this charge, OHS has offered dozens of examples of scholarships, public programs, exhibitions, educational materials, and online resources that reflect the county's diverse population present and past. The LOC members provide enthusiasm and accountability for this work, fostering the current reality of integrated diverse history in OHS's programming. The LOC also actively contributes to discussions and decisions regarding cost-sharing with the East County Historical Societies.

**Question 5: Asked by Commissioner Kvarsten:** As you mentioned, funding is really critical to the East County Historical Societies. How is funding currently shared with East County Cities? And going forward with the new levy, how will those funds be shared?

**Answered by Dianne McKeel:**

- The exact amount of money allotted to the four East County historical organizations was not specified in the 2010 levy language. Initially, the commissioners decided each organization would receive two payments a year of \$18,750, for a total of \$37,500 annually. Over time, discussions with the commissioners and the LOC led to a series of increases, with the current annual allotment being \$55,000. Furthermore, additional allotments were provided to the Crown Point Historical Society to support the construction of their new museum, and to the Troutdale Historical Society to fund a

critical deferred maintenance project. If the levy is renewed, the LOC members have urged that the allotments to these East County organizations increase again.

**Follow-up Question: Asked by Vice Chair Moore:** Are there any requirements or restrictions on how the East County historical societies can use this money?

**Answered by Janice Dilg:**

- She stated there are guidelines for the use of the money, though she wouldn't necessarily call them restrictions. The organizations are required to submit a report to the LOC twice a year (just as OHS does) so the committee knows the levy funds are being spent as intended. The spending should be focused around the history of the area and exhibits, and the money can also be used to support staff.

**Question 7: Asked by Commissioner Burton:** OHS last approved a strategic plan in 2024 which goes through the end of the next year. What have been your successes in the current strategic plan, and what have been the challenges?

**Answered by Kerry Tymchuk:**

- One of the biggest successes has been enhancing internal collaboration to leverage diverse expertise. Recognizing that the average employee tenure is about eight years, they created cross-department teams that enabled stronger planning, budgeting, and marketing, resulting in a more productive and efficient use of financial resources. Another major success is their commitment to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access. The board of trustees created a new committee focused on governance, recruitment, and DEI efforts, providing relevant staff training. To increase access to physical spaces, they adopted Culture City sensory kits, built a new all-gender restroom designed for use by individuals and caregivers of all sizes and needs, and built a new lactation room. They also continue elevator repairs and upgrades. Digitally, staff oversaw an outside assessment of the ohs.org website's accessibility and are implementing changes, with similar assessments underway for other web properties. Preservation successes include HVAC improvements, the installation of a new generator, and the hiring of a project archivist for the architecture and design collection. In 2026, OHS will launch the Portland Digital History Project, providing access to over 500 newly digitized archival items on an interactive place-based website, including peer-reviewed, fact-checked essays by 42 historians to foster understanding of Portland's history from Time Bay Memorial to 1905. The most significant challenge has been generating and analyzing data-focused community input. They are making this a priority by revising actionable milestones, tracking and utilizing data about partners, and implementing a new database to consolidate and access data about members, event attendees, educators, and volunteers.

**Follow-up Question: Asked by Commissioner Burton:** What will be your process for updating the strategic plan as well as how will you engage your partners, your collaborators, and the community in particular?

**Answered by Kerry Tymchuk:**

- While a specific work plan isn't set yet for guiding OHS's work beginning in 2028, they will rely on past processes. These past processes derive ideas and rely on data generated by all-staff workshops, feedback opportunities with regional and national professional colleagues and partners, OHS members and visitor surveys, educator surveys, and discussions with the OHS board of trustees, partners, and affiliates. He described it as a very lengthy process.

**Follow-up Question: Asked by Commissioner Burton:** I'm particularly curious about how you interact with the school districts in county and probably elsewhere - can you give us a few specific examples of what you're engaged with?

**Answered by Kerry Tymchuk:**

- OHS has an educator committee consisting of educators across Portland and the state that they interact with on a regular basis. They plan to reach out to them and will also provide surveys to every school tour that comes through to gather reactions and suggestions for improvements, and will rely heavily on feedback from their regular customers.

**Follow-up Question: Asked by Vice Chair Moore:** Do you also collaborate with higher education?

**Answered by Kerry Tymchuk:**

- They collaborate with higher education to a lesser degree than K-12, as K-12 schools primarily come through for tours and receive curriculum that meets educational standards. However, they do see some college tours and have individual academics who serve on their board. Notably, this fall marks the 150th anniversary of the University of Oregon opening and OHS is partnering with UO on an exhibit to commemorate it. Additionally, many academics are involved with the Oregon Historical Quarterly, which is OHS's peer-reviewed journal published four times a year.

**Question 8: Asked by Chair Donahue:** If the levy does not pass, we know that property taxpayers bill will be a little bit lower. Can you describe or give examples of what the negative impact will be to county taxpayers of the society losing this revenue source?

**Answered by Vince Jones Dixon:**

- Voter rejection of the levy renewal would force OHS and the four East County societies to try and replace the lost funding by increasing revenue and/or reducing expenses. This would very likely result in a decrease in open hours for the museum and research library, as well as fewer public programs due to reductions in staffing. Crucially, OHS and the four East County societies would no longer be able to offer free admission to Multnomah County residents.

**Question 9: Asked by Vice Chair Moore:** What do you wish the public knew about the work made

possible by this levy?

**Answered by Kerry Tymchuk:**

- Having the support and accountability provided by the levy truly enables OHS to serve its mission and values by performing long-term, community-centered work. This relies on the capability and expertise of their staff and partners. Because OHS has the good fortune of stable, predictable financial support from taxpayers, they can make and fulfill multi-year commitments to educators, partners, and the public. The organization exists as a trusted and accessible entity doing work on all kinds of history in all kinds of formats, and the levy has allowed them to leverage further support through private donors. They work every day to ensure Multnomah County residents receive what they should in return for their generous support.

**Follow-up Question: Asked by Vice Chair Moore:** Have you done any polling on this ballot measure?

**Answered by Kerry Tymchuk:**

- He responded that no formal polling has been done; all polling has been anecdotal. The county commissioners placed the measure on the ballot, and he believes it is because the commissioners hear from constituents who are delighted to have free access every day of the year to a world-class history museum and research library and want another chance to vote on it.

**Follow-up Question: Asked by Commissioner Burton:** The Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library is opening on July 4<sup>th</sup>, the same day we celebrate our 250th anniversary. A longtime very distinguished historian is on that board, and has been on that board since the beginning. I was wondering if you would be in support of the library and get the word out to honor the legacy of Theodore Roosevelt? Would you be engaging with that project since we have such a great local resource?

**Answered by Kerry Tymchuk:**

- For five or six years in a row before COVID slowed things down, OHS brought the nation's leading Teddy Roosevelt recreator, Joe Wiegand (who works at the Teddy Roosevelt Library), to Oregon. Courtesy of Wells Fargo, they took him on a Teddy Roosevelt Oregon road show, offering his performance to schools and historical societies across the state at no cost. He stated that Wiegand makes you "truly believe Teddy has come back to life". This program stopped during COVID due to a lack of public events, but they are currently talking to Joe about bringing him back to Oregon. He also noted that the Teddy Roosevelt statue, alongside an Abraham Lincoln statue, once stood in the park blocks across the street from OHS, and expressed hope that they may eventually return.

## **Closing Remarks**

Kerry Tymchuk added a final comment that OHS ensures its marketing and media, including every television commercial, consistently highlights the free admission benefit to 100% of Multnomah County residents, emphasizing that they have free access every day of the year.

Vice Chair Rita Moore concluded the questioning period and reiterated that the commission takes no action on tax levy measures.

There being no other business, Vice Chair Moore closed the meeting.