

Public Comment

Subject: Public Meeting – May 19th 2025 – East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District Budget Hearing

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To Members of the Commission:

At the budget hearing of the Urban Flood Safety and Water Quality District, I made in person public comment suggesting the TSCC use its regulatory authority to force a joint meeting with the East and West Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation Districts as well as the Parks program of the Metro Council for the purposes of initiating a conversation about consolidating these entities and coordinate programs.

The primary function of the TSCC is tax supervision and conservation to control the cumulative tax burden of multiple overlapping taxing entities. The TSCC has been derelict in its mission. Holding budget hearings in silos without considering the big taxation picture misses the point. Also, by failing to act on your limited authority, you send a message to these districts they don't have to consider the greater good. The result is we end up passing bloated school bonds and unnecessary zoo bonds while basic government services go neglected.

The East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District (EMSWCD) is a case in point. Last year, we passed a huge tax increase for a necessary bond levy for the new Urban Flood Safety and Water Quality district, which makes the Soil and Water Conservation districts redundant, especially on top of Oregon Metro's 5-year Parks and Nature levy. The existing tax levies by that district could have been purposed for the levee project without a tax increase, and the TSCC is the agency that should have looked at the big taxation picture and identified and arbitrated regional priorities.

Recently, the City of Portland announced a \$1Billion infrastructure shortfall, Multnomah County is facing a \$77 million dollar deficit, and TriMet is saying it will have to cut service in half by 2030. In that context, I would urge you to take a hard look at EMSWCD's spending and compare what is being funded to what was put before the voters in the voter pamphlet in 2004 when they authorized EMSWCD's levy. As a principle of good government, new tax levies should never be permanent and should always include a sunset clause in order to force a review of their effectiveness. This was not done and EMSWCD's protected funding pool is leading to wasteful and unnecessary spending while contributing to an overbearing tax burden. The TSCC really should take the lead in forcing that review. Historically, EMSWCD's funding was provided by the county as part of the general fund budgeting process where county commissioners could balance priorities.

As an example of EMSWCD's spending, I urge a hard reading of EMSWCD's \$1.3 Million "[Partners in Conservation](#)" grants announced on May 5th:

- \$57,000 to "Black Oregon Land trust" to "engage the community through environmental education that empowers marginalized communities as stewards of the land." This is about as clear as PPS's "Center for Black Student Excellence," and we already pay for public schools to educate youth. Balkanized educational funding is ineffective funding, and the Soil and Water Conservation District should stick to actual Soil and Water Conservation.

- \$26,744 to Willamette Riverkeeper for the “Portland Harbor Superfund Habitat Outreach Program.” So – instead of cleaning it up, we’re just going to pay people to talk about it and forget we have journalists who are already doing that, not to mention Willamette Cove is owned by Oregon Metro who has a huge parks bond levy that could be used to pay for the cleanup. The Federal superfund law also contains a P/R budget that tells the public about superfund sites, so this grant is also redundant.
- \$70,000 to “Wisdom of the Elders” to “provide education in the environmental and conservation sector.” So, why are we paying taxes for community colleges? This is a soil and water conservation district, not a department of education.
- \$70,000 to “Friends of Zenger Farms” to “increase the number of diverse farmers to build pathways for future BIPOC, women, and non-binary farmers in the Portland Metropolitan Area.” The program funds 4 apprentices and 6 interns. In other words, we are being taxed in order to provide free labor for a nominally nonprofit enterprise that only exists due to an urban growth boundary in a housing crisis and whose charitable status takes the land off the tax rolls. I also note East Multnomah sustains a number of underutilized community farms at a time when we have closed more than half of the region's community swimming pools.
- \$50,000 to Ecotrust for a 5-week paid training program designed to increase Native and Black participation in the green industry. Whites, Jews, Asians not allowed to apply. These are taxpayer funds, and we have a 14th Amendment. Maybe there are some impoverished blue eyed Blonde Ukrainian War refugees around who want to learn about participating in the green industry as they find new lives in Oregon.
- \$50,000 to the Columbia Land Trust for the Backyard Habitat Certification program by providing free raingardens to exclusively BIPOC individuals. Again, illegal discrimination by race, but maybe if Black homeowners weren’t taxed so much, they could afford to buy their own raingardens and build generational wealth.

Conservation programs are important, but at a time the city of Portland is closing community centers, taxing urban residents to make cost-sharing grants to private landowners and redundant underutilized “community farms” on the urban periphery inaccessible to the carless BIPOC urban dwellers EMSWCD’s claims to serve largely represents a wealth transfer. EMSWCD’s board requirements state members must own or manage at least 10 acres of land. This is nearly impossible for the vast majority of Portlanders who actually pay taxes to the district, and for some of EMSWCD’s voting districts, there are only a few parcels that are even that size meaning these board seats are effectively reserved for a small clique of landowners. The problem is even worse for West Multnomah SWCD where I reside and for which I think you did not (to my knowledge) hold a public hearing on and only performed a perfunctory staff review is even worse (not to mention they don’t allow the public to go to their chummy board meetings – trust me, I’ve tried). In my subdistrict of WMSWCD there are exactly two parcels larger than 10 acres in private ownership meaning my

board seat is effectively a sinecure for a board member who has held the seat since 2006 and directs grants to programs that improve his property.

EMSCWD's staff and board may have fond attachment to their programs, and those who reap financial benefit can wash wasteful Partners in Conservation grants in emotional rhetoric, but I am asking the TSCC to focus on its job and purpose: Tax Conservation and Tax Supervision. Just holding a budget hearing is not enough – the taxing entity must be put in context so that budgeting can be consolidated to balance regional needs and priorities. This means governance reform: big ideas like consolidating the City and County or redrawing community college district lines. The TSCC has limited authority to force discussion and change, and too little focus has been made among the commissioners on the big picture. I am asking the TSCC commissioners to read about their powers in the ORS and take initiative. Excessive taxation is leading to wealth flight eroding the tax base and reconsidering whether continuing to have special Soil and Water Conservation districts independent of the county or the new Flood Control district is a conversation the TSCC should have.

A good place to start after completing budget reviews would be to commission an independent external performance audit of the TSCC that would make recommendations used as backup for legislative changes. I have previously suggested the TSCC should be the author of voter pamphlet tax proposals where it can independently inform the voters of both the pros and cons of a proposal. Had the TSCC done this in 2004 pointing out the problems of special taxing districts and lack of sunset clause, I feel EMSWCD's operations and mission would be more effective today.

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