

DISCUSSION PAPER
CITIZEN INITIATIVE TO FUND STATEWIDE OUTDOOR SCHOOL PROGRAM

West Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District

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CONTEXT

In July 2016, the Outdoor School for All Ballot Measure Campaign Committee (aka Save Outdoor School) qualified a citizen’s petition initiative for the November ballot that creates a separate Outdoor School Education Fund financed by Oregon State Lottery money distributed for economic development. The initiative will appear on the ballot as Measure 99 – *Outdoor School Education Fund*. The Measure specifies that the *Outdoor School Education Fund’s* purpose is to provide every Oregon fifth sixth-grade student a week-long outdoor school program or equivalent. Oregon State Lottery allocations to the Fund shall not reduce lottery proceeds dedicated under the Oregon Constitution to education, parks, beaches, watersheds, fish, and wildlife. Passage of Measure 99 would continuously appropriate money to Oregon State University to administer and fund outdoor school programs statewide.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this discussion paper is to provide the Board information about the *Outdoor School Education Fund* measure including a range of positions that the Board could take on the initiative. Each position is objectively evaluated against the existing Board adopted vision, principle and goal statements for the purpose of identifying the extent to which the position is in alignment with the purpose and mission of the West Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District (WMSWCD).

BACKGROUND

History and Importance of Outdoor Education in Oregon

Considering the strong local culture of environmentalism, it’s no surprise that Oregon has a long history of outdoor and environmental education. A collaboration of employees from OSU, the Soil Conservation Service (later to become the Natural Resources Conservation Service), and the Oregon Game Commission launched the first pilot outdoor school program in 1958. Since then, outdoor school programs have been developed in the following four ways:

1. Service districts, which work with school districts using state and federal funds in addition to tuition from participants (e.g. Multnomah County’s outdoor school program).
2. Schools (e.g. Crook County’s program, in which students pay \$100 each).
3. Private providers, in which schools contract with and pay the provider to run the program (e.g., Trackers Earth and OMSI. OMSI costs \$135-\$270 per student, depending on the length of the program).
4. Partnerships (e.g. Coast Range Natural Resources Education Organization, a partnership between schools, government agencies, businesses and organizations).

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Much of the funding for outdoor schools comes from partnerships with government agencies, grants, and school fundraising activities. For instance, Multnomah Education Service District (MESD) receives funding and curriculum resources from Metro to support waste reduction education at outdoor schools. WMSWCD also supported Multnomah County outdoor schools with \$15,000 per academic year, 2012-2014. The Gray Family Foundation awards grants for residential outdoor schools, and lists many other grant sources including Nickelodeon Big Green Help grants, Target Take Charge of Education Program, and Toyota TAPESTRY Grants for Science Teachers.

In addition, the Oregon 2009 “No Oregon Child Left Inside” act establishes a plan for promoting environmental literacy and place-based learning statewide. The act and the subsequent Oregon Environmental Literacy Program (OELP) focuses on understanding our interdependency with the natural world, systems thinking, interdependency of human communities, planning for and creating a sustainable future, and personal and civic responsibility. Outdoor education is an essential component of the plan, and residential outdoor schools are encouraged. However, a study commissioned by the Oregon Community Foundation revealed that only 37% of 6th grade students, and less than 5% of 5th grade students participate in a residential outdoor school program.

Studies by the Oregon Community Foundation, MESD, and the State Education and Environment Roundtable (SEER) found significant educational and economic benefits from outdoor schools. According to MESD’s study in collaboration with Portland State University researchers, outdoor school improved attendance, especially for male students and Spanish speaking students. According to the SEER report “Closing the Achievement Gap,” outdoor education improved performance on standardized tests, reduced classroom management problems, improved students’ abilities to apply science to real-world situations and to apply systems thinking, and increased student enthusiasm for learning. It also improved students’ communication skills and their ability to work in groups.

Research commissioned by the Gray Family Foundation found that government expenditures on outdoor school resulted in a multiplied return on investment due to the economic activity generated from conducting outdoor school; both from direct wage (and wage multiplier) benefits from outdoor school employees as well as the economic gains from non-wage necessities such as supplies, food, and site rental -- approximately \$27 million in state economic activity should outdoor school reach 50,000 students per year.

Proposed Outdoor School Framework and Impacts

In 2015, Senate Bill 439 passed almost unanimously in both the Oregon House and Senate. The bill set up a framework for a statewide outdoor school program overseen by Oregon State University Extension Service (OSU). Senate Bill 439 called for OSU to assist school districts and education service districts in providing outdoor school programs. OSU responsibilities include convening an advisory committee to administer a program awarding grants to schools and education service districts with outdoor school proposals that meet the bill’s criteria. Outdoor school programs must be integrated with local school curricula, improve leadership and critical thinking skills, and address the inequity of outdoor educational opportunities, in addition to teaching about four major topics relating to natural resources and environmental sciences. The bill also states that the advisory committee shall prioritize programs that could improve students’ academic performance, reduce disciplinary challenges, and would be accessible to students of all abilities. The committee, comprising of representatives of the environmental community, the natural resources community, and fifth-grade or sixth-grade education would also

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recommend standards for outdoor school programs. OSU would also be responsible for assisting in the development and review of curricula, funding distribution, contracting with schools and education service districts, staff training, reviews and evaluation of programs, and other implementation details.

OSU Extension Director and OSU Vice Provost for University Outreach and Engagement, Scott Reed, submitted testimony in support of Senate Bill 439 during the 2015 legislative session. He emphasized that OSU's experience in managing outdoor education programs for 4-H and the OELP provides an excellent foundation for future management of outdoor schools. Pat Willis, of OSU Extension 4-H and a member of the OELP Leadership Team, and another OSU Extension employee who wished to remain anonymous, also stated that OSU has a good foundation of resources and systems in place to fulfil the role proposed in Senate Bill 439. OELP is currently guided by a leadership team of OSU Extension staff with additional direction from a council representing the diverse, statewide stakeholders in environmental education. OELP does not necessarily include outdoor schools and does not provide funding for outdoor schools. OSU does, however, assist in some outdoor school related activities such as training and professional development for environmental educators.

Filling a Funding Void

Senate Bill 439 did not indicate a source of funding for its implementation. Shortly after its passage, the Outdoor School for All Ballot Measure Campaign Committee was formed for the purpose of identifying a funding source. This led to Initiative Petition 67, known as the "Outdoor School for All" campaign, which would allocate money for outdoor school by diverting Oregon Lottery's economic development proceeds to a dedicated outdoor school fund. The citizen signature gathering campaign was successful and the initiative qualified for the November 2016 ballot as Measure 99 - *Outdoor School Education Fund*. Some opposition to the initiative has arisen because of the funding source.

Measure 99 would set aside four percent of the lottery economic development fund per fiscal quarter (between \$5.5 and \$22 million annually) to be placed in an Outdoor Education Fund, to be managed in accordance with Senate Bill 439. Twenty-seven percent of Oregon Lottery funds were spent on economic development between 2013 and 2015, compared to 57% for public education (including state schools, colleges and universities), and 15% for state parks and natural resources. The text of Measure 99 states that reallocation of funds for the Outdoor School Education Fund shall not reduce funding allocated for public education or natural resources, so essentially Measure 99 would reduce the Oregon Lottery economic development fund allocation by 15% (4 percent loss of the 27 percent allocation to economic development).

ANALYSIS

There is some opposition to Measure 99 due to the source of funding for the Outdoor Education Fund. Senator Betsy Johnson, for instance, argues that taking money from a source intended for economic development would divert it from projects that would benefit more Oregonians than could benefit from outdoor schools. As an example of the potential losses to economic development, the Oregon Lottery Fund 2015 Expenditure Report indicates approximately 74 distinct economic development uses of lottery proceeds. Multnomah County received \$4,802,224 from the State Lottery Fund, all of which went toward economic development related expenditures. This was the most money received by any county in 2015, with most counties receiving fewer than \$1 million. These funds went toward debt service on the construction of the East County Courthouse, construction of the Sellwood Bridge, the

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Portland Downtown Retail Strategy (improving street safety, reducing homelessness in the area), infrastructure and a development plan to support agriculture, and improving access to apprenticeships, trainings, and employment opportunities for local residents. So, this type of funding in Multnomah County, and elsewhere statewide, stands to be cut by 15% should Measure 99 pass and become law.

Further, there is no guarantee that Measure 99 would provide enough funding for “Outdoor School for All.” Outdoor school programs cost \$278 per student on average based on examples given by the Gray Family Foundation. There are 43,782 students enrolled in sixth grade in Oregon, so providing outdoor school to all 6th grade students in the state would cost approximately \$12.2 million – which sits in the middle of the \$5.5 to \$22 million Measure 99 is expected to raise for outdoor school. However, Measure 99 does not preclude schools, education service districts, or private education providers from using other forms of funding to fill any gaps that may arise. Clearly, “Outdoor School for All” in Oregon is much more attainable with passage of Measure 99 than without.

As indicated by the OSU testimony on Senate Bill 439 in 2015, OSU is the logical entity to lead the expansion of outdoor school statewide and is willing to do so should the funding be provided. Furthermore, Reed stated in his testimony that OSU has also used existing programs to improve learning opportunities for children of underserved communities, so there is reason to believe this practice could be expanded with the passage of Measure 99. This is both consistent with Senate Bill 439 and with WMSWCD’s guiding principle of “incorporate[ing] equity and inclusion awareness and practice into our work process and programs.”

Measure 99 is directly aligned with District goals and values. Although it would redirect funding from economic development, it directly benefits communities in need of better environmental education resources. The initiative is supported by most District stakeholders, and the small amount of known opposition is neither contentious nor integral to the District’s work.

Two position options on *Outdoor School Education Fund* were evaluated with respect to the following WMSWCD goals, values and principles in the Long-Range Business Plan:

- Our mission statement, “Conserve and protect soil and water resources for people, wildlife, and the environment,”
- Goal 5, “Cultivate land stewards of all ages,” and
- Guiding Value 8, “Our community conserves natural resources most effectively when all stakeholders are engaged and welcomed”;

as well as an overall assessment on the public relations impact of taking the position.

Position Options

A. Remain neutral

- i. Pro (+): Little to none.
- ii. Con (--): Backlash from the community is unlikely, although some local residents might hope to see us supporting outdoor schools.
- iii. Outcomes: Voters opposing the initiative would be more swayed by economic experts than by natural resource experts, so our inaction is unlikely to influence them. This option is not in alignment with the Goal 5 – “Cultivate land stewards of all ages.”
- iv. Action Details: No action necessary.

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- B. *Write an opinion article or letter to the editor that supports the concept of outdoor school, but does not take a formal position on Measure 99, to be published in the Oregonian, on our website, and other forms of distribution that we have access to. Option B1 – Would be to take a formal position in support of Measure 99.*
- i. Pro (+): Clearly affirms Goal 5 – “Cultivate land stewards of all ages.” **Option B1 – Would be to take a formal position in support of Measure 99; however Letters to the Editor and related opinion pieces would have to be developed by the Board without use of District staff and could not be disseminated on the District website due to limitations from Oregon Revised Statute 260.432 on allowable and restricted activities of public employees in political campaigning and lobbying.**
 - ii. Con (--): Little to none.
 - iii. Outcomes: Potential to sway undecided voters due to a higher degree of visibility and longer exposure time.
 - iv. Action details:
 - Emphasize that Oregon’s schools are struggling, and that providing funding for outdoor education would improve schools’ ability to teach a full school year and teach Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) curricula effectively.
 - Highlight the benefits of outdoor school to leadership and job skills in addition to academics.
 - Emphasize that the funding could provide access to outdoor education for schools with little funding, which are typically schools serving communities with many low income families and people of color.
 - Note that we should seek another source of funding that is more permanent, able to fund outdoor school for all Oregon children, and more directly aligned with the values associated with outdoor schools. One WMSWCD staff member recommended an environmental tax, which was positively received among the 6 staff members present.

Table 1. Summary of Options and Implications for WMSWCD Goals				
OPTION	Mission Statement	Goal 5	Guiding Value 8	PUBLIC RELATIONS
A	+(--)	--	--	+(--)
B	+	+	+	+(--)

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RESULTS

Table 1 shows the results of the analysis. Option B is clearly in alignment with WMSWCD Mission, Goals and Guiding Values. Further, by staying clear of taking a formal position on Measure 99, District staff and resources can be used to assist with the action details. However, should a formal position in support of Measure 99 be taken (Option B1), Letters to the Editor and related opinion pieces would have to be developed by the Board without use of District staff. Further, these materials could not be disseminated using District resources or posted on the District website. These restrictions are due to limitations from Oregon Revised Statute (ORS) 260.432 on allowable and restricted activities of public employees in political campaigning and lobbying.

SOURCES

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INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

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Anonymous employee of Oregon State Extension in the Portland area

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