Legislation Introduced to Fix Oregon’s Broken System for Preserving State’s Historic Places

- Restore Oregon endorses the legislation as a community-centered approach to save cultural heritage while creating housing, rural economic development and seismic safety -

PORTLAND, OR (February 26, 2019) – Oregon’s system for protecting its historic places and investing in their restoration and reuse is considered “worst practice” in the U.S. by national leaders in the preservation movement. Two bills introduced by the Senate Environment and Natural Resources Committee today are intended to fix that. The legislation would help curb demolitions, promote restoration, seismic upgrades, and conversion of old buildings into housing, and engage local communities in decisions about what should be protected in their community.

According to Restore Oregon, the state’s “worst” reputation tracks back to the mid-1990s and an innocuous-sounding, but dysfunctional, law referred to as ‘owner consent.’ ORS 197.772 stipulates that only a property owner can approve historic designation. Thus, local stakeholders impacted by demolitions have no voice in deciding what should be deemed historic and protected.

SB 927, the Public Participation in Preservation Act, would utilize a public process for historic designation, giving all stakeholders a say. Individual property rights, public benefits, and local land use goals would all be considered, and a decision on designation rendered by local government. Local governments would also be responsible for defining protections for newly designated historic places.

Compounding Oregon’s bottom-rung reputation regarding preservation is its lack of a Historic Tax Credit to offset the costs of seismic retrofitting, repairs, and code upgrades. Thirty-five states offer tax credits as an effective economic stimulus – especially important in rural communities – and studies compiled by the National Trust for Historic Preservation have shown them to be a significant source of job creation, returning a net profit to state coffers.

SB 929 The Preservation, Housing, and Seismic Safety Act would provide a 25% “Rehab Rebate” on rehabilitation costs for historic buildings, with an additional 10% for seismic upgrades. It prioritizes projects that provide housing (such as converting vacant upper floors above storefronts into apartments), and ensures that at least 30% of the funds go to small and rural projects.
The rehab rebates would come from a fund created by the auctioning of state income tax credits. The fund would be capped at a to-be-determined amount per biennium.

The result, according to supporters, will be:

• Less demolition – more of Oregon’s cultural heritage is saved for future generations.
• More housing – to help fill the deficit of supply across the state.
• Improved seismic safety – lives, livelihoods, and our cultural heritage is protected.
• Needed economic development – jobs, new businesses, and tourism will be attracted to vibrant, historic places.
• Rural communities benefit – all of these factors will add vitality to Oregon’s rural cities and towns.

Oregonians are encouraged to contact their legislators to share their support for these bills through phone calls, letters and in person.

Quotes from Supporters:

“In this time of rapid change, if we want to retain the unique sense of place that defines communities across Oregon, we need much better processes and tools. These bills enable a balanced, community-based process that retains cultural heritage while also establishing an essential financial tool for restoration, conversion into housing, and seismic upgrades.” — State Senator Michael E. Dembrow, Chair, Senate Environment and Natural Resources Committee

“States with historic tax credits typically see twice as many renovations occur in the year after adoption. Oregon is one of only 15 states without a tax-based incentive for rehabilitation.
— Renee Kuhlman, National Trust for Historic Preservation

“Oregon’s current system of preservation is completely one-sided and out of step with our values. Demolitions impact the entire community, and now the community – property owners, tenants, neighbors, local officials - will have a voice in deciding what historic places are worthy of protection – and they’ll have more financial tools to bring them back to life.” — Peggy Moretti, Executive Director, Restore Oregon

Downloadable images and data sheets

About Restore Oregon:

Founded in 1977, Restore Oregon is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that advocates for sound preservation policy and legislation. The organization’s mission is to preserve, reuse and pass forward the historic places that create livable communities. Each year, Restore Oregon provides statewide educational programming and technical assistance, while working to save the sites and structures featured on its annual list of Oregon’s Most Endangered Places. Restore Oregon holds
over 40 conservation easements on historic properties, thereby protecting them in perpetuity. Learn more at www.restoreoregon.org, Facebook.com/RestoreOregon and Instagram.com/RestoreOregon #restoreoregon

###