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Oregon Senate passes bill to boost services to children

SB 123 allows communities to start local children's service districts

SALEM – The Oregon Senate voted to give local communities another option for how they choose to support their children's health, wellbeing and development.

Senate Bill 123 – which passed the Senate on a 18-10 vote – allows communities to form children's special districts with the ability to accept grants and loans, and to ask taxpayers to help pay for children's services within the geographic boundaries of the district.

Currently, there are 28 special districts in Oregon for issues including irrigation, parks and recreation, cemeteries and health, but there are no special districts to fund programs focusing exclusively on children and youth. This bill would change that by creating a mechanism to form these districts.

"This bill gives communities the opportunity to decide for themselves whether they want to establish a special district to help support their children's development," said Sen. Chuck Riley (D-Hillsboro), who introduced and carried the bill. "We have special districts to protect water and numerous other resources. Our children are our greatest resource and our communities around the state should have the opportunity to create support systems to help their children have a brighter future."

A children's special district can provide services that support children's total health and well-being. These services must be provided outside of school hours to children younger than 18. To form a special district, a petition must be signed by 15 percent or more of electors in a territory or 100 electors, whichever is greater. If the petition threshold is reached, there would be an election to approve forming the district.

These districts can be as large or small as a community wants, encompassing a neighborhood, town, part of a county or an entire county. It also could include communities of multiple counties that collaborate to form their own district. Communities are under no obligation to form a Children's Special District, but the bill provides an option to do so.

Children's services are defined broadly so that communities can customize the services they offer to best meet their children's unique needs. Some of the services that could be provided by a district include mentoring, substance abuse prevention, supplemental nutrition and other services a community determines will benefit its youth.

"I am proud to be moving this bill forward, as it's something that I've been working hard on for a very long time," Riley said. "This gives communities one more option for working for the wellbeing of their children. It's a new tool to provide sustainable local funding for services to children from birth through 18 years old, outside of school time. It also will provide much-needed stability for organizations delivering these services. It's a great opportunity for communities to identify gaps that might exist or barriers that are challenging their youth, and to take positive steps to address them. It's good for communities and great for kids."

Senate Bill 123 now goes to the House of Representatives for consideration.

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