

Oregon county officials dismantle \$1 million-a-year diversity office and now say they want to 'focus on merit and not to racialize the workplace'

By HARRIET ALEXANDER FOR DAILYMAIL.COM

26 January 2024

- Clackamas County in Oregon has announced its Equity and Inclusion Office will close on February 5 after eight months of discussion
- The office was costing almost \$1 million a year, and Commissioner Ben West said it was divisive and unnecessary
- West said the county will recognize people on merit: Emmett Wheatfall, a former county diversity manager who retired in 2019, said it was a backwards step

An Oregon county has voted to eliminate its Equity and Inclusion Office, saving the district almost \$1 million a year after deciding the unit was divisive and unnecessary.

Clackamas County, which encompasses the eastern Portland suburbs and stretches out to Mount Hood, announced earlier this month it was closing the office. The two full-time employees will be reassigned to jobs in different parts of the council.

Ben West, a Republican nurse and US Navy reservist who became one of five members of the Board of County Commissioners last year, said that the office was not working in the interests of the residents.

'We believed that it was really important to focus on merit, fairness and equality, not to racialize the workplace and the county,' West told Fox News.

'We didn't want that in our county any longer.'

West, who like his husband Paul is white, is raising a black son, Jay.

He said that he felt having a DEI office pushed people to be categorized by their race or gender or orientation.

'We value the individual. We value you regardless of your immutable traits,' West said.

'Those are not the things that make you unique and special to Clackamas County. It's that individual spark inside you that does, that makes you a person.'

He said they want people to 'all feel like it's a great place to live', with a 'diversity of ideas.'

He added that they felt the DEI office was 'becoming a distraction, and we didn't want that in the county.'

DEI departments sprung up nationwide amid the soul-searching sparked by George Floyd's May 2020 death.

But they have been controversial, with critics saying they lead to unfair hiring practices and discrimination against people who fail to tick the right diversity boxes.

Supporters say the policies are necessary to right entrenched historic wrongs, and swing the pendulum back to a neutral spot.

The office will officially close on February 5, eight months after they began debating whether to get rid of it.

In May 2023, Commissioner Mark Shull said it was an 'unnecessary expense' that 'only foments friction.'

West agreed, saying diversity, equity and inclusion efforts create a 'victim mentality.'

But Emmett Wheatfall, a former county diversity manager who retired in 2019, said in July that getting rid of the office could lead to more complaints of discrimination.

He told Oregon Live last week that the decision to get rid of the office was a backwards step.

'I'm saddened – it seems like we're going in reverse,' he said.

'My hope is we can return to moving forward again, but it's going to take champions.'