

‘Focus on merit’: Oregon county axes diversity office that cost nearly \$1 million a year

Portland-area county to dissolve its DEI office, reassign some positions to other departments

By Hannah Ray Lambert

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Officials in an Oregon county are dismantling their nearly \$830,000 a year diversity, equity and inclusion office, despite outcry from those who oppose rolling back social justice initiatives.

"[We] believed that it was really important to focus on merit, fairness and equality, not to racialize the workplace and the county," Clackamas County Commissioner Ben West told Fox News. "We didn't want that in our county any longer."

Clackamas County's equity efforts began in 2004 with a volunteer advisory council. Then in 2020, as racial justice protests swept the nation — and raged for more than 100 consecutive nights in nearby Portland — the county created a three-person Equity and Inclusion Office.

County Commissioner Mark Shull proposed defunding the office last spring, calling it an "unnecessary expense" that "only foments friction."

This month, the county's administrator sent a memo to employees announcing the office would dissolve as of Feb. 5. Its two full-time positions are being transferred to other departments. One position will focus on the county's compliance with federal and state civil rights laws, while the other will support "community engagement and communications efforts that are accessible and inclusive for all populations," according to the email, which was shared with Fox News.

Reaction has been mixed. Last August, residents both in favor of and in opposition to cutting the DEI department packed a county commissioners meeting. Some taunted West as he tried to speak, according to local news reports.

At least five Clackamas County mayors previously signed onto an open letter urging the commissioners to expand equity and inclusion efforts, not cut them. More than 700 other community members, business owners, organizations and politicians also signed the letter.

"This is not about a budget, it's not about a financial crisis — it's about racism, sexism and all the things that this country is trying to overcome," Emmett Wheatfall, a former Clackamas County diversity manager, told The Oregonian last year. Wheatfall retired in 2019, before the county established its new equity office.

OREGON COUNTY WILL FOCUS ON 'DIVERSITY OF IDEAS,' COMMISSIONER SAYS.

Clackamas County is one of three counties that make up the Portland metro area. While its residents lean Democratic, they have favored Republican gubernatorial candidates in the past several elections.

West — who was a plaintiff in the case that made gay marriage legal in Oregon and has a Black son — said the move demonstrates the county's commitment to a "diversity of ideas" rather than identity politics.

"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."

The DEI field saw a surge in popularity during the political unrest following George Floyd's killing in 2020. Numerous universities, companies and government offices have rolled back their diversity initiatives in recent months.