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**HOUSE BILL 2136**

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**State of Washington 67th Legislature 2022 Regular Session**

**By** Representatives Shewmake and Paul

AN ACT Relating to establishing the Washington state rural commission; adding a new chapter to Title 43 RCW; and creating a new section.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON:

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  The legislature declares that the public policy of this state is to ensure vital, thriving communities for all Washingtonians. The legislature believes that no person's health or economic outcomes should be determined by their zip code, and it recognizes that the state is responsible for improving its engagement with people who live in rural areas. In order to improve the lives and livelihoods of people in rural areas, the legislature seeks to implement effective policies that recognize their unique needs and to include rural experiences and expertise in all aspects of policymaking and state government. Therefore, the legislature deems it necessary to create a commission to carry out the purposes of this chapter.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  The definitions in this section apply throughout this chapter unless the context clearly requires otherwise.

(1) "Commission" means the Washington state rural commission.

(2) "Rural" means areas within the state:

(a) In which open space, the natural landscape, and vegetation predominate over the built environment;

(b) That foster traditional rural lifestyles, rural-based economies, and opportunities to both live and work in rural areas;

(c) That have not been subjected to an extensive conversion of land into sprawling, low-density development; and

(d) That generally utilize rural governmental services and do not require the extension of urban governmental services, as defined in RCW 36.70A.030.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  Subject to the availability of amounts appropriated for this specific purpose, the Washington state rural commission is established in the office of the governor. The commission shall be administered by an executive director, who shall be appointed by, and serve at the pleasure of, the governor. The governor shall set the salary of the executive director. The executive director shall employ the staff of the commission. The executive director and any staff may work remotely to facilitate their engagement with rural communities.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  (1) The commission consists of 13 members appointed by the governor.

(2) The governor shall consider nominations for membership based upon maintaining a balanced and diverse distribution of racial and ethnic identity, geography, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, and occupational representation, whenever practicable.

(3) The governor's appointees shall include:

(a) Ten members of the public, with one person who is employed in each of the following 10 fields: Health care, agriculture, natural resources, small business, manufacturing, construction, prekindergarten–12 education, child care, community advocacy, and local government;

(b) One person who is a member of a tribal government; and

(c) Two representatives of the state's public higher education system: One of whom is an employee of the Washington State University cooperative extension, and one of whom represents the state's community college system.

(4) All commission members serve at the pleasure of the governor, but in no case may any member serve more than three years without formal reappointment by the governor. Of the persons initially appointed by the governor to the commission, five must be appointed to serve one year, four to serve two years, and four to serve three years. Upon the expiration of those terms, all subsequent appointments are for three years. Any vacancies occurring in the membership of the commission must be filled for the remainder of the unexpired term in the same manner as the original appointments.

(5) The commission shall have four advisory members: Two members of the senate, one from each of the two major political parties, appointed by the president of the senate; and two members of the house of representatives, one from each of the two major political parties, appointed by the speaker of the house of representatives. All advisory members must support the legislative intent of the commission. The legislative advisory members are nonvoting members. All legislative advisory members shall serve for a two-year term and the position of any legislative advisory member shall be deemed vacated whenever such member ceases to be a member of the house from which the member was appointed.

(6)(a) Nonlegislative members must be reimbursed for expenses incurred in the performance of their duties in accordance with RCW 43.03.050 and 43.03.060.

(b) Legislative members shall be reimbursed for expenses incurred in the performance of their duties in accordance with RCW 44.04.120.

(7) A simple majority of the commission's membership constitutes a quorum for the purpose of conducting business. Legislative advisory members are not included in determining a quorum.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  The executive director of the commission shall:

(1) Monitor state legislation affecting people who live in rural areas;

(2) Work with state agencies to assess programs and policies that affect people who live in rural areas;

(3) Coordinate with other commissions to address issues of mutual concern; and

(4) Work as a liaison between the public and private sector to eliminate barriers to economic and health equity for people in rural areas.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  (1) The commission shall have the following duties:

(a) Actively recruit and maintain a list of names of qualified people who live in rural areas to fill vacancies on various boards and commissions;

(b) Provide a clearinghouse for information regarding both state and federal legislation as it relates to the purposes of this chapter;

(c) Promote equal treatment of and effective delivery to rural areas by government agencies and the private sector;

(d) Identify and define specific needs of people of color in rural areas and provide recommendations for addressing those needs;

(e) Review and make recommendations to the legislature on strategies to increase the number of rural communities able to attract, access, and utilize private, state, and federal funding;

(f) Consult with state agencies regarding the effect of agency policies, procedures, practices, laws, and administrative rules on the unique problems and needs of people in rural areas. The commission shall also provide any data, input, and recommendations to state agencies on proposed agency rules and the development and implementation of comprehensive and coordinated policies, plans, and programs focusing on those problems and needs;

(g) Provide resource and referral information to agencies and the public. The commission may gather data and disseminate information to the public in order to implement the purposes of this chapter;

(h) Consult with relevant community development financial institutions, philanthropic organizations, and other nonprofit organizations;

(i) Hold public hearings to gather input on issues related to the unique problems and needs of people who live in rural areas;

(j) Advocate for removal of legal, economic, and social barriers for rural residents; and

(k) Review best practices and success stories in rural communities and provide recommendations to state agencies and other stakeholders to adopt policy measures that improve the lives and livelihoods of people in rural areas.

(2) The commission must submit a report to the appropriate committees of the legislature and the governor every two years detailing the commission's activities. The report submitted must be in electronic format pursuant to RCW 43.01.036, and include, at minimum:

(a) Recommendations for addressing the needs identified under subsection (1) of this section;

(b) Input received during public hearings and recommendations for addressing the problems and needs discussed at the public hearings; and

(c) Recommendations regarding recognizing the contributions of rural communities and the diversity of rural residents to the overall economic vitality of Washington state.

(3) State agencies must provide appropriate and reasonable assistance to the commission as needed, including providing notice of agency proposed rule making and gathering data and information, including but not limited to voluntary demographics, economic disparity studies, and other collectible data by state agencies, in order for the commission to carry out the purposes of this chapter.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  (1) The commission has the power to receive gifts, grants, and endowments from public or private sources that are made for the use or benefit of the commission and to expend the same or any income therefrom according to their terms and the purposes of this chapter. The commission's executive director shall make a report of such funds received from private sources to the office of financial management on a regular basis. Such funds received from private sources must not be applied to reduce or substitute for the commission's budget as appropriated by the legislature, but must be applied and expended toward projects and functions authorized by this chapter that were not funded by the legislature.

(2) In carrying out its duties, the commission may establish such relationships with public and private institutions, local governments, private industry, community organizations, and other segments of the general public as may be needed to promote equal opportunity for people in rural areas in government, education, economic security, employment, and services.

(3) The commission may adopt rules and regulations pursuant to chapter 34.05 RCW as are necessary to implement the purposes of this chapter.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  Sections 2 through 7 of this act constitute a new chapter in Title 43 RCW.

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