

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

Prepared for OAFP

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Session Fizzles Out

After a nearly two-week walkout, House and Senate Republicans offered to come back on Sunday, March 8, the final day of the session, to pass needed budget bills.

Democrats rejected that, likening it to blackmail where the Rs get to cherry pick the bills that would pass. House Speaker Tina Kotek (D-Portland) said the democratic process was being “held hostage by a small group of legislators.” She described it as “shameful, petty, partisan politics at its worst.”

House Republican Leader Rep. Christine Drazan (R-Canby) said it’s the Democrats who have supermajorities in both chambers and control the Governor’s office. “It’s time for them to look in the mirror and recognize that their approach to leadership is what led us to this day,” she said.

Only three bills made it all the way through the legislative process and were signed into law this session. 121 bills passed out of committee and were awaiting a floor vote in one or both chambers when the session came to an abrupt end Thursday afternoon.

All of the bills that were in the queue, awaiting a floor vote, are now dead.

The Speaker and Senate President said the Emergency Board will meet on Monday, March 9 to pass funding to address the coronavirus and for Pendleton-area flood relief.

They also said the Governor is going to use executive action to deal with greenhouse gas emissions.

And they want a special session called within 30 days to pass “needed legislation.”

With that, President Courtney (D-Salem) said, “I hate to give up. This poor institution has been hurt so badly.” But, “This session is over. This session is over.”

Coronavirus in Oregon

As of Thursday, the Oregon Health Authority reported that Oregon has one confirmed case and two presumptive cases of COVID-19.

The disease spreads when people touch or breathe in droplets from ill people who cough, sneeze or talk. The good news is that 80% of cases in the US have only exhibited mild symptoms such as fever, cough and shortness of breath, but there is a possibility of more severe symptoms.

Hospitals and healthcare systems in Oregon have scaled up preparedness efforts to address the COVID-19 threat. One issue they have been dealing with is that hospital workers who receive a patient not yet diagnosed with COVID-19 are potentially exposed to the disease without proper protection measures. This then requires a 20-day quarantine for all employees who may have been exposed and can quickly lead to workforce shortages.

Oregon Health Authority Director Pat Allen says he signed an emergency procurement order with three EMS organizations to provide support to rural areas that may run into this issue.

Climate Change and Impacts on Public Health

Public health officials from Washington and Multnomah counties warned the House Health Committee this week that “[c]limate change is not a problem of the future, it is a problem of today.” Just in the past few years, we have experienced the hottest years on record, the lowest snow pack, drought, and one of the worst fire seasons on record.

In the Portland metro area, they said hospitals are seeing increased rates of heat-related illness. But less direct issues are also presenting themselves. For example, the area in which vector-borne diseases such as West Nile virus and Lyme disease are found is expanding. Eventually this could result in the vectors being commonplace in Oregon. Oregon’s health care system needs to be prepared for that they told the Committee.

Air quality suffers as well, as warmer temperatures create dryer and longer summers. Fire smoke is one obvious cause, they said, but increased pollen counts are also a factor. ED visits for asthma-like symptoms have likewise been steadily rising over the last three years.

They said mental health, diminished water quality and reduced animal health are all potential impacts of the changing climate as well.

HB 4146 – OEBC for Part-time Faculty Fails in W & M

Ways and Means decided not to appropriate \$5.4 million to provide employee-only health insurance to part-time college faculty through the Oregon Educators Benefit Board (OEBC). Between 1,500 and 1,700 faculty would have been eligible.

Currently, part-time faculty can purchase OEBC insurance but must pay 100% of that cost. Under HB 4146, the employee would pay 10% of the premium; the state would pay 90%.

Ways and Means Co-Chair Sen. Elizabeth Steiner Hayward (D-Portland) said, “It is shameful that our adjunct faculty are paid so poorly and treated so shabbily.” Co-chair Sen. Betsy Johnson (D-Scappoose) said, “It’s fiscally irresponsible to make this an open-ended responsibility of the General Fund.”

Steiner Hayward said they offered an alternative, adding the money to the community college appropriation. “Make it clear community colleges and universities would be required to pay their fair share. But It was dismissed.”

There was widespread agreement these part-time faculty need support and health insurance, but Ways and Means decided HB 4146 was not the way to do it.

SJR 201 – Change Quorum to Simple Majority

The Senate Rules Committee considered two alternatives to change the Oregon legislature’s quorum requirements. Both are constitutional amendments and would need to be approved by Oregon voters.

Currently, two-thirds of legislators must be present for the House or Senate to conduct business. Oregon is one of only four states that requires more than a simple majority for a quorum.

House and Senate Republicans have staged walkouts during the 2019 and 2020 sessions to deny a quorum and prevent action on various bills, including the controversial greenhouse gas cap-and-trade bill.

Sen. James Manning (D-Eugene) said, “This two-thirds majority is now being used as a weapon.”

One opponent of the bill testified saying, “You are telling the minority that you don’t matter. And that the people they represent don’t matter.”

The Senate Rules Committee voted to change the quorum requirement to a simple majority. But there's a Catch-22. A two-thirds quorum is necessary to vote on changing the quorum requirement, sending it to voters, and that did not happen before the session adjourned.

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