

\$13 minimum wage proposal unveiled

By Jonathan J. Cooper
Associated Press

SALEM (AP) — House Speaker Tina Kotek unveiled a proposal Monday to gradually raise Oregon's statewide minimum wage to \$13 an hour by 2018 and give local governments the right to go higher if they choose.

The change would give Oregon the nation's highest minimum wage Jan. 1, when all workers would have to be paid at least \$11 an hour, up from the current \$9.25. The wage floor would go up \$1 a year until it hits \$13 an hour in 2018.

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Coming less than a month before lawmakers must wrap up the legislative session, Kotek's proposal is a long-shot. She said she hopes to

at least start a debate that can continue after lawmakers leave Salem. Kotek also acknowledged that raising the minimum wage is viewed skeptically by some of her fellow Democrats in the Senate.

“It's hard when people are really scraping to get by and we're not taking up important issues,” said Kotek, a Portland Democrat. “So I'm just trying to make sure this important issue is still there by the end of session.”

Kotek said raising the minimum wage statewide would get low-income workers across the state closer to a sustainable wage while allowing jurisdictions with higher costs, like Portland, to go further.

Business interests and Republicans object to raising the minimum wage or lifting the pre-emption, which prohibits local governments from setting their own pay requirements.

“They do not have a bookkeeper full time,” said Jan Meekcoms, Oregon state director for the National Federation of Independent Businesses, a small-business

lobby group. “They do not have an HR department. The administrative nightmare of keeping track of all this, in different jurisdictions with different wages, would be horrific.”

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Advocates of raising the minimum wage have proposed a ballot measure setting it at \$15 statewide. Justin Norton-Kertson of the group 15 Now PDX, which proposed the ballot measure, said he welcomed Kotek's proposal. If her bill were to pass, the group of labor and liberal groups pushing for the increase would decide whether to continue pushing a ballot measure to reach \$15.

Health insurance rates will go up in 2016

PORTLAND (AP) — Health insurance premiums are poised to go up for 220,000 Oregonians who buy their own coverage, according to the state's proposed rates unveiled Thursday.

In some cases, insurance companies proposed rates that were similar to or better than the current rates, but they were told by the state that they must be raised. The state says the cost of medical care has far outstripped revenue, forcing insurers to dip into reserve funds.

The proposed premiums are still subject to public comment and formal approval.

Under the state's proposal, the cost for the lowest priced silver plan for a 40-year-old will be \$271 per month next year, up nearly \$50 from this year, the *Oregonian* reported.

Most insured Oregonians get coverage from an employer or the government, so they're unaffected by the proposed rate hikes. About 75 percent of people in the individual market, who are affected, qualify for federal

tax credits averaging almost \$200 per month.

Moda Health, which covers more than 100,000 Oregonians in the individual market, would raise premiums an average of 25.6 percent under the state's rates.

Last year, Oregon avoided some of the big premium hikes seen elsewhere following the implementation of President Barack Obama's healthcare law. State officials have often boasted that Oregonians enjoyed some of the lowest premiums in the nation. But now the state says those rates were too low.

According to the state, in 2014, insurers spent \$830 million on medical care for people with individual plans and collected \$703 million in premiums.

“We need to ensure a market that long term is stable, competitive and ensures pricing that is much closer to the cost of delivering healthcare,” said Pat Allen, director of the state Department of Consumer and Business Services, which oversees the Insurance Division.

Committee ends stalemate, approves Ore. marijuana bill

SALEM (AP) — After weeks of stalemate, a state legislative committee has advanced a bill setting up Oregon's legal marijuana system.

The approval of the joint House-Senate committee on Monday sends the bill to the full House, which can take it up as soon as this week.

The measure includes a compromise on local control, an issue that has stymied previous attempts to pass

marijuana bills. The compromise would allow local governments to ban recreational and medical marijuana businesses in counties that voted overwhelmingly against Measure 91 in last year's election. Elsewhere, voters would have to approve a ban on marijuana sales.

Lawmakers didn't take up a separate bill that would create a sales tax on pot in place of the harvest tax in Measure 91.

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