

Supermajority Democrats face hurdles

By Andrew Selsky
Associated Press

SALEM (AP) — The election gave Democrats a three-fifths supermajority in Oregon’s Legislature with greater power to impose taxes, but the Senate president said Wednesday he’ll still seek bipartisan support, noting that Republican lawmakers could doom revenue-raising bills if they sit out the votes.

Senate President Peter Courtney told The Associated Press he felt Oregon Democrats’ celebrations Tuesday evening were too strong. Not only did they win supermajorities in the state House and Senate, but Democratic Gov. Kate Brown defeated her Republican challenger, a victory she called “a slam-dunk.”

“I worried last night because of the celebration. Somebody lost last night, and they lost pretty good,” Courtney said in a telephone interview. “When you really beat someone and you really put them down, you know, you can train an anger and a hatred that’s so violent, that they’ll go to every extreme they can think of to stop you.”

If Republican lawmakers feel irrelevant, they could resort to sitting out votes, said Courtney, a Democrat who’s the longest-serving legislator in Oregon history.

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Quorum rules say 20 senators must be on the Senate floor and 40 representatives on the House floor for votes to take place, Courtney said. Democrats fell short of those numbers even though they’ll have at least 18 Senate seats and 36 House seats in the 2019 session.

House Speaker Tina Kotek said stronger Democratic majorities in the House and Senate will help Democrats focus on school funding, climate change, and a housing crisis.

The Democrats achieved a supermajority in the House when Rachel Prusak, a nurse, beat Republican Rep. Julie

Parrish to represent a district south of Portland. Parrish had backed a ballot measure — defeated by voters in January — that would have eliminated a new tax to provide health care for low-income Oregonians. Prusak ran for office “to protect the rights of her patients.”

In southern Oregon, Democrat Jeff Golden, a river guide and public television production manager, edged Republican Jessica Gomez to take Republican Sen. Alan DeBoer’s seat, giving Democrats a supermajority in the Senate. Gomez had been DeBoer’s legislative aide.

Courtney said he was relieved voters defeated a measure on Tuesday that would have amended the state Constitution to require a legislative supermajority for bills that raise revenue through tax exemptions, deductions, credits or fees. Passage would have made it almost impossible to create a budget, Courtney said.

In the 2019 legislative session, which starts in January and runs to early July, Democrats will aim to pass a multibillion-dollar revenue measure to fund public education. Courtney said it would be a value-added tax or a gross receipts tax, but not a sales tax.

Having a supermajority doesn’t mean Democrats will act in unison to pass tax bills, said Christopher Shortell, associate professor of political science at Portland State University. For example, Golden, who will be sworn in along with other winners on Jan. 14, will have to be mindful he’s from a fairly conservative district, Shortell said.

“Any time you’re a Democrat in a seat that was held by a Republican ... if you come in and join the Democratic supermajority to enact some tax bill that’s very unpopular with your constituents, that’s a problem for you,” Shortell said. “A supermajority does not guarantee that all those Democrats will join in.”

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