

# OREGON

## Quiet start to session, but tensions simmer below surface

First day of meetings not as contentious as expected

By Sam Stites  
Oregon Capitol Bureau

SALEM — A contentious proposal to reduce the state's greenhouse gas emissions dominated political chatter in the weeks before the 2020 legislative session began.

So much so, that observers expected "sparks" when lawmakers convened on Monday, Feb. 3, said Sen. Brian Boquist, R-Dallas.

But sitting in his office on the appointed day, wearing cowboy boots, jeans and his signature turtleneck under a sports jacket, Boquist said, "It seems like it's in neutral. This building is never neutral."

Then the longtime senator reconsidered. Instead, he said, it was more like the Legislature was "out of gear" or like standing on a calm beach as the water recedes before a tsunami.

As legislators prepared for meetings inside the Capitol, Boquist said he said he was going back to his district office in Dallas to read legislation and meet with constituents. This might be his last chance to do that for a while.

"As soon as committees begin, our lives are not our own," he said.

The pace is expected to pick up quickly as legislators race to meet deadlines to finish within 35 days.

"If it doesn't happen fast, it doesn't happen at all," Senate Majority Leader Ginny Burdick, D-Portland, told reporters on Monday. "And that's the reality of a 35-day session. So I think you're going to see a lot of pressure

at the very beginning." Republicans have complained Democrats, who hold large majorities in both chambers, would push through hefty proposals without giving the public enough time to weigh in.

Senate Minority Leader Sen. Herman Baertschiger, Jr., R-Grants Pass, opposes "robust" legislation in such a compressed time, and said in an interview that Democrats "have a large appetite."

Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, Oregon's longest-serving Senate President, was at the Capitol Monday, despite worries that he might be absent due to a hip injury that had kept him from attending a series of pre-session meetings earlier this month.

Despite using a walker, Courtney, 76, gaveled through a light agenda speedily, and drew that day's floor session to a close in less than an hour.

In the House, things stretched on a bit longer, as Republicans voiced opinions in a series of procedural "remonstrances."

"We get in a little too deep, in my opinion," said Rep. Daniel Bonham, R-The Dalles, on the House floor Monday morning.

Rep. Kim Wallan, R-Medford, even invoked the Beatles in criticizing policies pushed through by the legislature in the recent past, quoting from "Strawberry Fields Forever":

"The line that was in my head was, 'Living is easy with eyes closed,'" Wallan said. "Misunderstanding all you see."

She concluded her floor speech: "We need to really dig down and see what our policies do to real people, really poor people, before we

just cavalierly decide this is what's best for everybody," Wallan said. "We need to look a little closer. I hope that we will keep the Beatles in mind this session, and keep our eyes open and try to understand."

Rep. Barbara Smith Warner, D-Portland, who leads Democrats in the House, extended an olive branch—albeit one laden with platitudes.

"To my colleagues across the aisle, while I know that we won't always agree on the path forward, I truly believe that there is more that unites us than divides us," Smith Warner said. "...I hope we search for common ground and where our policy views diverge, I hope that we always assume the best intentions from each other."

The House of Representatives has sworn in four new members, and the Senate, one new member, since last year's session concluded.

Senate Republicans haven't ruled out a repeat of their walkout that marked the last session.

But if Republicans ditch, they could imperil legislation that would allocate state money to their districts or address constituent concerns.

"My concern is if the short session blows up, there's some things that need to be fixed that we won't get to," said Rep. Ron Noble, R-McMinnville, speaking before the session.

While Boquist's bag is packed and ready to go in case of another walkout, he said he only expects to be gone for one or two days. He said he just wants the greenhouse gas-reduction bill to be put to the voters and that a boycott is a legitimate tool that has a bipartisan history.



Cap and trade architect Sen. Michael Dembrow, D-Portland, explains how he's attempted to craft his bill to overcome Republican opposition. Sam Stites/Oregon Capitol Bureau photo

"I'm actually upbeat," he said.

Burdick again criticized the tactic employed twice last year by Senate Republicans.

"I totally disapprove of walking out," Burdick said. "They're getting paid to do a job and it's their duty to show up for work. Their constituents are not represented if they don't show up, and I know that my constituents would be very, very mad, if I just didn't like the way things were going and didn't show up. So I'm assuming they will show up."

On Monday, House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, stressed she talks regularly with House Minority Leader Christine Drazan, R-Canby.

"The vast majority of members, both Republican and Democrat, want to work collaboratively, want to get

things done together, are going to show up for work," said Kotek. "And then you probably have people both on the left and right who are more like, 'We need to go further' or 'We need to walk out.' But I think those are small groups in both sides. I think people want to work together."

Sen. Jeff Golden, D-Ashland, said he's confident that Republicans and Democrats will pass legislation proposed by Brown and her Council on Wildfire Response.

Baertschiger said Monday he agreed with almost all the Democrats' views on wildfire, with only mild points of disagreement.

The heavy lifting of the Legislature gets underway Tuesday, as committees move rapidly to conduct hearings and consider which legislation to advance.

That work is likely to be overshadowed Thursday by what happens outside the Capitol.

Timber Unity, a group agitating against what it says will be higher costs for rural Oregonians and people working in the natural resource industry, is planning a rally at the Capitol for Thursday, Feb. 6. The group opposes proposed greenhouse emissions legislation.

"All I'm asking for is, I hope people come with very specific suggestions, and not just 'We don't like the bill.' Because the reality is, until we have another plan that can reduce our greenhouse gas emissions we need to go with this," Kotek said. "We need to make it as good as we can and pass the bill."

*Jake Thomas and Claire Withycombe contributed to this report.*

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