

State senators shoot it out over gun-control bill

Private deals would become illegal

By Gerrit Koeping
Emerald Contributor

SALEM — A political shoot-out is brewing in the Oregon Legislature as lawmakers consider a Senate bill that would further restrict an individual's ability to purchase rifles, shotguns and handguns.

The pro-gun lobby is crying foul, claiming the bill violates compromises that were made in the 1989 legislative session. The anti-gun lobby is saying this is a new year and past compromises are just that — past compromises.

Two years ago, under the leadership of Rep. Vera Katz (D-Portland), both sides of the debate reached a compromise that became the omnibus weapons bill of 1989.

That law requires a person to wait 15 days for a background check to be completed before purchasing a handgun from a registered dealer. The purchaser must be at least 21 years old, have no felony record and no history of mental illness.

To buy a rifle or shotgun, an individual need only be 18 years old and sign a statement that he or she is neither a convicted felon nor mentally disturbed.

The proposed bill, Senate Bill 633, would extend regulations for handguns to all firearm purchases, tighten restrictions on concealed weapons permits and forbid firearms purchases between private parties. Moreover, anyone convicted of a misdemeanor involving alcohol or drugs would not be allowed to buy a firearm.

While many political observers don't believe the Senate bill will win approval, Katz is presently working to form a

coalition — similar to the one she helped bring together in 1989 — to help the new bill win approval.

But this time the pro-gun lobby might not be willing to join.

Rep. John Minnis, a Portland Republican who helped sponsor the 1989 bill, said he is angered because SB 633 "is a violation of a very delicate balance that was found in the 1989 gun bill."

Nancy Whitaker-Emrich, co-chairwoman for Oregonians Against Gun Violence, believes differently.

"I really see it as a continuance of what [Katz] has done," Whitaker-Emrich said. "We think she has so far done an excellent job. We are simply adding to her bill."

The bill would also close a major loophole that Whitaker-Emrich said allows felons to purchase firearms. It would become illegal for private citizens to buy or sell firearms without a waiting period or background check.

The majority of handgun interactions are private transactions, she said. Individuals can avoid a background search by purchasing firearms at garage sales, through newspaper ads or at gun shows.

The proposed law would require private citizens to go through a gun dealer when selling or buying handguns and long guns.

The bill would also strengthen requirements for obtaining a concealed weapons permit. Currently, a permit can be obtained by applying at the county sheriff's office.

The sheriff's office completes a basic check for any outstanding warrants and confirms a county address before issuing a permit. Individuals are not re-



Photo by Brian Kelly

A bill currently being considered in the Oregon Senate would tighten restrictions on concealed weapons permits and forbid private party firearms purchases. Also, anyone convicted of a misdemeanor involving alcohol or drugs would be prohibited from buying a firearm.

quired to state why they desire a permit, and the sheriff's office cannot deny a permit unless the criteria for obtaining one is not met.

This bothers Sen. Dick Springer, D-Portland, one of the bill's sponsors.

"The decision made by the last Legislature to permit thousands of people to obtain concealed weapons permits without demonstrating need for a concealed weapon was a mistake and we have to correct that mistake," he said.

The proposed bill would require individuals applying for a permit to state why they need to carry a concealed weapon. The sheriff's office can reject the application based on the reason's merits.

However, the proposed law would give sheriffs too much power over who can obtain a permit, said John T. Nichols, a lobbyist for the Oregon State Shooting Association.

He said the criteria for issuing a permit would vary from county to county under the proposed law.

Most legislators are attacking the bill on technical grounds, but the proposed law is also drawing opposition based on philosophical grounds.

"The real price of freedom is risk," said Rep. Bill Dwyer, D-Springfield, who keeps a .45-caliber pistol in his Salem office. "Every time government takes an element of risk out of life or the individual, it also takes a portion of freedom."

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