Roberts bows out, but job well done

ROBBIE REEVES

Following a tumultuous three-year stint as governor, Gov. Barbara Roberts has decided not to seek another term in office.

Roberts made the right choice. Gov. Roberts made the decision not to run, according to her statement, because she is still emotionally dealing with the death of her husband and because of health problems with other members of her family.

However, there may be other reasons for her deciding not to run, namely the threat of losing the primary election in May. John Kitzhaber, retired Oregon Senate president, appears to be ahead in the polls by a 2-to-1 margin. She would have also faced a tough general election battle in November.

It's too bad that Roberts isn't running for governor again. But her family and her remaining 11 months as governor must have a higher priority than a reelection campaign, and the governor must be applauded for making the right choice.

Now that Roberts has decided not to run again, every newspaper and TV station in Oregon is beginning to review the past three years of her term as governor. Many are coming to the conclusion that Roberts was a "disappointment" of some sort, or that she didn't live up to the expectations of Oregonians.

Roberts was not a disappointment to Oregonians. She was probably as successful as any governor could have been given the circumstances.

After a tough four-candidate race in November 1990, Roberts won the election with a plurality of the vote. About the same time Roberts was declared the winner of her race, Ballot Measure 5, the now infamous property tax limitation measure, won.

A constitutionally mandated tax limitation was something pretty new for Oregonians, and Roberts, together with the state Legislature, began to cut millions of dollars from budgets that were never expected to be slashed.

With the added challenge of growing enrollment in schools, Roberts discovered that it was necessary to do more work with less money. This has become the law of the land here in Oregon. Roberts was merely the first victim.

Roberts had to work with an often uncooperative legislature. When the Oregon House of Representatives had a Republican majority in 1992-93, it became a lot less easy for the governor to pass her programs. Interestingly enough, the legislature was probably more of a failure than anything else, as it took a record amount of time to complete its session this past year and really didn't do that much.

Roberts took her vision for health care for all to the state and, after several years of negotiation and research, created the newly-implemented Oregon Health Plan that would insure low-income Oregonians that previously had no medical insurance.

In 1991, Roberts undertook a relatively unprecedented step when she took several months to ask Oregonians what they wanted from their state government. Her *Conversation with Oregon*, as it was known, involved hundreds of Oregonians giving their views to Roberts. The idea was quite visionary and an asset to the state.

The governor was instrumental in campaigning in 1992 for President Bill Clinton and against Measure 9, an anti-gay rights initiative. She even campaigned for her Secretary of State Phil Keisling, though he was running against Roberts' own stepdaughter, Mary Wendy Roberts.

But no matter what was going on, whether good or bad, Roberts kept trying. She continued to give Oregon everything she had to give even in the face of personal hardships, such as the death of her husband this past fall. But these things never stopped Roberts.

It would have been nice to not have had Measure 5, or for Roberts to have had a cooperative legislature, or any number of things. She could have then done a lot more for the state. But the truth is that this is a less than ideal world, and everyone has to make do with what they have. Roberts did just that.

Roberts has pledged to serve the rest of her term, which will expire when a new governor is sworn in next January. And one must hope that Roberts continues to be involved with government in some way after her term ends, as she is a great asset to Oregon.

But then who will Oregon elect as their next governor? Will it be Kitzhaber, whom nobody really knows anything about yet? Or will it be a Republican like Denny Smith, whose stridently conservative viewpoint cost him his seat in Congress when he was voted out in 1990? Or maybe Craig Berkman, a relatively unknown man whose claim to fame was heading the Oregon Republican Party. It seems like any of these choices would be a letdown after having Roberts for four years.

One can only hope that whoever is elected to be the governor of Oregon will have as much courage, stamina and guts as Roberts did.

Oregon deserves no less.

Robbie Reeves is a columnist for the Emerald.