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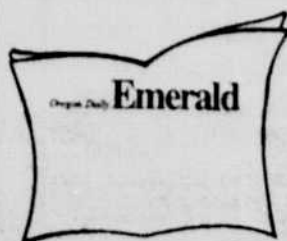
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Oregon health plan faces turbulence

SALEM (AP) — The Oregon health plan faces more turbulence ahead as legislators tackle what may be its biggest obstacle yet: a requirement that all employers provide basic coverage for their workers.

The "employer mandate" takes effect in 1997 or 1998, depending on the size of the business. Already, though, business owners are preparing to fight the mandate in the 1995 Legislature.

The first phase of health plan took effect Feb. 1, extending Medicaid benefits to 120,000 low-income people by raising the cigarette tax.

Those costs will rise, however, because of inflation and because the program will run for a full two years in the next budget period. Lawmakers will have to decide next year how — or whether — to pay the additional costs.

But the big fight likely will be over how to deal with the economic impact on businesses.

The state has awarded a \$93,000 contract to National Economic Research Associates of Los Angeles to examine the possible effects of the mandatory coverage.

Vickie Gates, administrator of

the health plan, said the study will cover small and large employers as well as self-employed people, and will consider ways employers and workers can save money.

The report is due in October, ahead of the legislative session that begins in January.

"I believe it's the next session that will make the decision in terms of how Oregon proceeds with the next stages of our health plan and the methods that we use to get to the goal of a more universal access into the health care system," Gates said.

The state estimates that 470,000 Oregonians have no health coverage. Nine out of 10 are in homes with either full-time or part-time workers, Gates said.

The health plan will require employers to furnish coverage for employees who work at least 17.5 hours a week.

Businesses with 26 or more workers face a March 31, 1997, deadline. Smaller employers have until Jan. 1, 1998, to obtain coverage.

Business representatives say the burden will be onerous on many employers.

"Done properly, the study will show the fiscal impact on

small businesses and just how devastating the impact will be," said Joe Gilliam, director of the Oregon arm of the National Federation of Independent Business. The federation has 16,500 members, two-thirds of which employ fewer than 10 people.

The impact on business can affect the state's ability to balance its budget, Gilliam said.

"If you hinder employers and put an extra burden on them, you cannot forecast the extra tax revenue you once could," he said. "All elements of the plan tend to be very fragile politically."

Clackamas businessman Jon Egge said that while he provides health coverage for his workers, a study is needed to provide factual data on the impact of requiring coverage for all employers.

"There are not any good, solid numbers we can depend on," said Egge, owner of M.P. Plumbing with 35 employees.

Federation members describe the effects of health care insurance on them "but have been saying it subjectively, rather than objectively," he said.

At the same time, he said, the overall cost of the health plan needs to be kept in mind.

Protesters against Rose Festival pageant

PORTLAND (AP) — After 86 years, the tradition of choosing a queen for the city's annual Rose Festival is under attack by women who say it's outdated and sexist.

A few dozen protesters planned to demonstrate tonight outside Portland's Civic Auditorium, where the 1994 queen of the mythical "Kingdom of Rosaria" will be crowned.

The protest was organized by the group Stopping Violence Against Women after it stirred up a debate this week over the pageant. The queen is chosen from 14 high school "princesses," who were selected by their peers.

"I think beauty pageants are generally regarded as sexist," said Rose Theirl, 24, a member of the protest group.

The Rose Festival has grown from a tiny turn-of-the-century flower show to a gala civic celebration with 83 separate events that generate an estimated \$65 million to the regional economy. It also boasts the second-largest floral parade in the nation, after the New Year's Day extravaganza in Pasadena, Calif.

Susan Hunter, whose 17-year-old daughter spoke out against the pageant earlier this week, believes it is a beauty contest that demeans women and perpetuates the stereotype of the submissive female.

"As long as we're talking stereotypes, we can't see the truth about exploitation," Hunter said. "These women are being objectified and exploit-

ed."

The current Rose Festival queen, Mikylah Myers, who surrenders her crown to her successor tonight, says Hunter and her daughter are taking the event too seriously.

"This is a wonderful opportunity for young women," Myers said. "I feel there's a tremendous amount of energy being focused on the wrong thing. I'd like to see it focused on glamour magazines where they say, 'Women, starve yourselves to look good.' Or on the actual beauty pageants themselves."

Myers views the queen's position as a responsible one-year job representing the city of Portland.

"They're asking you about your resume," Myers said of the series of formal and informal interviews that determine the choice of queen. "It's like any job interview: You comb your hair and look your best to show respect for the people who are judging you."

A previous winner of the queen's crown, Deanna Connell, says the title is coveted for the travel and the business connections it provides, not confirmation that the young women are attractive.

"I've never seen the Rose Festival as a beauty pageant. I saw it as an ambassadorship," said Connell, who was named queen in 1989. "It opens lots of doors. As princesses, they helped us all find jobs. It gave us a push and an advantage. Young women need those opportunities."



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