

What's the 'Office of Outdoor Recreation?'

Newly-developed unit will look to further develop state's recreation economy

ZACH URNESS SALEM STATESMAN JOURNAL
USA TODAY NETWORK

It would be easy to believe that Oregon's newly-created Office of Outdoor Recreation is a needless extravagance.

The state's snow-capped volcanoes and salmon-filled rivers already fuel a \$10.8 billion tourism industry, support 141,000 jobs and host a population more likely to spend time outdoors than the national average.

But dig deeper into Oregon's relationship with the outdoors and you'll find some concerning trends, officials say.

The percentage of Oregonians who take part in outdoor recreation has actually declined in some cases, said Chris Havel with the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department.

And the economic benefits from outdoor recreation, while booming in places like Bend and Portland, have lagged behind in other parts of the state.

"Why is that, and what can we do about it?" Havel said.

One answer is the Office of Outdoor Recreation, which was created by the Oregon legislature last session and was signed into law by Gov. Kate Brown.

The goal, in a nutshell, is to take Oregon's recreation economy from good to great.

The state is currently recruiting for a director of the new unit, which will pay from \$70,000 to \$97,000 per year. The job will become part of the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department and was funded by legislation that allocated \$218,000 to \$250,000 per biennium.

The new office has seen plenty of support, but it's also been criticized as unnecessary and sparked concerns about what types of recreation are prioritized.

The new office will be tasked with a host of priorities, but Havel said they'll start with four goals.

- ▶ Improving **access** to outdoor recreation, whether through new trails or better facilities.

- ▶ Improving **participation** levels in outdoor recreation, especially in communities that don't typically take part.

- ▶ **Stewardship** of resources, whether by moderating crowded areas, bolstering ecological quality or adapting to climate change.

- ▶ **Sustainability** of resources, so parks or campgrounds don't fall into disrepair.

The job will also seek to address the statewide imbalance in tourism and recreation. While places such as the Columbia River Gorge and Bend area are often overcrowded, many places on Oregon's South Coast and Klamath-Siskiyou region are sparsely used.

"The goal is to see outdoor recreation reach its full potential through a unified strategy," Havel said.



Hikers head into the shadow of South Sister, Oregon's third-tallest mountain. The state's snow-capped volcanoes and salmon-filled rivers fuel a \$10.8 billion tourism industry and support 141,000 jobs. ZACH URNESS/STATESMAN JOURNAL

Oregon is the fourth state to set up an office devoted to outdoor recreation, following in the footsteps of Utah, Washington, and Colorado.

In Utah, for example, the office awarded more than \$400,000 to recreation projects that funded everything from trails systems to an archery range.

The office will face major challenges. As a state-level job, the office won't have direct power over the 53 percent of Oregon that's managed by the federal government.

And the office will face skepticism from communities wary of bureaucracy or the type of recreation being promoted.

The group that supported the creation of the office included businesses such as Keen Footwear and REI that primarily support recreation such as hiking, biking, and kayaking.

That makes groups that support hunting, fishing and motorized recreation nervous about being overlooked.

"Despite the fact that hunting is a longstanding and strong economic driver, Oregon's government continues to ignore it," said Dominic Aiello, president of the Oregon Outdoor Council, which promotes hunting. "Travel Oregon, the state's official tourism office, doesn't even list hunting under the 'Things To Do' for

outdoor recreation in Oregon.

"It's beyond time that Oregon stops treating hunters like a black sheep and give us a seat at the outdoor recreation planning table."

Havel said the office wouldn't be beholden to any group and would seek to represent all recreation uses. He added that the advisory group to the office would seek to represent every type of recreation.

"We're not going to draw a boundary around recreation," he said.

Havel said he did understand the monumental challenge the office would face as it ventures to become a clearinghouse for an industry that spans such a wide array of locations and activities.

"The size of it is pretty terrifying, and we know it will be tough" Havel said.

"The only comfort is there's a large community ready to help, and a hunger to find a better way forward."

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Report: Oregon health agency's money troubles double

HILLARY BORRUD THE OREGONIAN/OREGONLIVE

PORTLAND, Ore. – Money problems at the Oregon agency that oversees Medicaid could be more than twice as large as already disclosed, a new report reveals.

Due to errors involving abortion, prison, undocumented immigrants and other factors, the state might have overpaid its contractors or owe other entities as much as \$78 million, Oregon Health Authority director Patrick Allen disclosed in a letter to Gov. Kate Brown made public Nov. 27. That's on top of \$74 million in overpayments The Oregonian/OregonLive reported last month.

The agency may have problems taking in money as

well as doling it out. Allen listed \$34 million that he said is owed to the agency or went untapped, due to budget and accounting problems. The report was Allen's first biweekly update to Gov. Kate Brown, who directed Allen to submit them in a Nov. 7 letter. Allen's letter was first reported by the East Oregonian on Nov 27.

The disclosures hint at the red meat the reports could serve up to the campaign to overturn \$340 million in health taxes enacted to fund the state's Medicaid program. State auditors are also expected to release their report on the state's Medicaid system in the upcoming weeks. Voters will decide in a Jan. 23 special election whether to keep those taxes, which lawmakers narrowly approved earlier this year.

In his letter to the governor, Allen laid out problems that ranged from the state paying Medicaid benefits for unauthorized immigrants to incorrectly using federal funds to pay for abortions.

Allen was careful to say that in most cases, staffers are still investigating the problems and the figures and other details will likely change as they learn more. He cited the following problems:

- ▶ **Medicaid for unauthorized immigrants:** Oregon incorrectly paid health care organizations it contracted with to care for an undisclosed number of unauthorized immigrants, who were mistakenly listed in the state's computer system as being eligible for more than emergency room care. Allen did not identify the time frame in which the problem occurred, but it caused \$25.7 mil-

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lion in "payment errors and over-claimed federal funds" which the health authority already repaid with state general fund in June.

Health officials are still investigating another potential problem related to immigrants in the country illegally. Medicaid covers some emergency care for unauthorized immigrants plus prenatal and delivery care for pregnant women. As health staffers were preparing to implement a new abortion law earlier this year, they discovered the state might have been keeping these mothers on Medicaid after their babies were born, a time when the women were no longer eligible, Allen wrote. Benefits might have continued if the mother's "provider does not notify us of the delivery date," but the state is still investigating the issue, according to Allen.

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Parks

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fair-weather recreationist, they can purchase the pass at the park the first time they use it, say when the weather warms in April (oh, please god, make it so; I want to start the tomatoes in the greenhouse early).

Since the pass lists the month and the year that the permit expires, the meter doesn't start running until they actually begin to use it.

Which gives the person the chance to cash in on some off-season park visits if the fall/winter weather cooperates in 2019 and 2020.

Oh, let it be so. I want to be picking those tomatoes in the greenhouse in October.

I thought that approach was genius until another friend who's even more, ahem, cost-conscious than I am (hard to believe, I know) unveiled his approach.

How tight is this thrifty friend who shall remain nameless? Like a dug-in tick on a long-haired dog.

Which led to this exchange with somebody who's way over-analyzing the parks-pass purchase.

It was a long time ago, but the gist of it went something like this:

His strategy is to buy the two-year pass, but only on the first day of the month that he plans to hit the road. Let's say you buy it on April 1, 2018, he explained.

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come," McGee said. "We've got the community support, the athletes, the coaches, we can be good at whatever we want to be. It's just all about the effort, the commitment. I think these kids will be hungry for more after this one for sure."

For as small of a school as Santiam is – it had 156 students in the 2016-2017 school year – it has a remarkably high concentration of athletes who have been on this ride.

Of all the athletes, two were on basketball team that

Since the pass only has the month and year that it expires, the last day of April 2020 in this case, you get a whole extra month for free.

Huh?

His example of a squandered opportunity is the generous gift-giver who buys a discounted yearly pass on Dec. 1 to beat the rush. So it will expire on Dec. 31, 2018.

OK.

But they don't actually give it to them until Dec. 25, you know, Christmas, he continued, sounding as if he was talking to a backward 5-year-old.

So you're losing out on 24 extra days this year between the time you bought it and when you give it to them, he said. And you only pick up six free days between Christmas and the end of December.

Case closed as far as the finagle king is concerned.

"OK. I think I get it," I replied. "So you buy a gift certificate good for the two-year pass, and tell the person you give it to buy the permit on the first day of the month they plan to visit a state park for the first time so they get an extra month."

He shook his head.

"And you claim you know me. Fifty bucks is way too much to spend on a gift for anybody," he said, sounding indignant that I would even suggest such a thing. "I was talking about myself."

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won the 2A state championship in March and football team: Keys and senior receiver Jordan Lanham, who rushed for 72 yards and a touchdown and had four receptions for 70 yards and a touchdown.

"It's been an adventure, it's been awesome," Keys said. "I love it. I love every moment of it."

Over the course of this season, the community support around Santiam's football team has grown.

The school that draws from Mill City, Gates, Detroit and Idanha has played to bigger audiences each game.

"We've had people buy us food, we've had people buy us hotel rooms," McGee said. "That's what got us here is the people around us and the support and the fun that they had doing it. It was awesome."

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