

Outdoors program in jeopardy from cuts

Parks and Recreation Department facing \$22 million budget shortfall

Zach Urness

Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

It has been a roller coaster of a few months for the director of Oregon's Office of Outdoor Recreation.

Cailin O'Brien-Feeney — who was hired to guide outdoor recreation statewide in 2018 — has gone from preparing a major report for Oregon Gov. Kate Brown to hoping that he keeps his job next year.

O'Brien-Feeney was on a list of 46 people slated to be laid-off by the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department last week due to a \$22 million budget shortfall related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

That would have meant the Office of Outdoor Recreation, created by the Oregon Legislature in 2017, would have gone dark on July 1, officials said.

Two other agencies — the Oregon Marine Board and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife — stepped in to provide funding for the office for the rest of the year, but it's unclear where funds will come from to carry it through 2021.

The office was projected to cost \$170,000 from July 2020 to June 2021. To keep it going through December, ODFW and OMB chipped in \$37,500 each.

"The Office of Outdoor Recreation has helped encourage agencies, retailers and industry to work together in support of outdoor recreation," said Roger Fuhrman, information and education administrator for ODFW. "This funding will provide time to figure out how to continue supporting these collaborative efforts."

O'Brien-Feeney said he was confident a long-term solution will be found.

"I'm confident that we'll figure out a way to fund the office next year, even if we're not sure exactly how that will happen right now," O'Brien-Feeney told the Statesman Journal. "It has been very af-



The Office of Outdoor Recreation, created by the Oregon Legislature in 2017, would have gone dark on July 1 because of budget cuts, until two other agencies ponied up money to keep the office operating through the end of 2020.

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firming to have other agencies see value in the office and step in."

The near-layoff-experience comes just as the office prepares to release a major report to Brown outlining 30 recommendations for improving the state's outdoors and recreation economy.

Previous drafts of the recommendations included everything from ways to fund search and rescue to creating a single Oregon Outdoors Pass.

O'Brien-Feeney also played a role in coordinating the response from Oregon agencies as they opened and closed recreation facilities and requirements shifted for outdoor businesses during the pandemic.

"This work will remain important to how the state pieces its economy back together," he said. "This office was set

up to be a hub between all these different groups and agencies, and we've brought so many people together around a shared set of idea about how we move forward. To lose that would be tough."

The office was slated for elimination as Oregon's state parks department cuts huge expenses.

The closure of state parks and continued decline in revenue from the Oregon Lottery — the agency's two main funding arms — has left a budget hole that's led to a major cutback in the rangers and staff at state parks.

Additional cuts have come from central staff, including park planners, designers and those in communications, officials said.

"Our state park services had already

suffered a dramatic workforce reduction. We didn't want to cut into that any deeper, so the layoffs focused on our central staff," said Parks and Recreation Department spokesman Chris Havel. "We will be working with the stakeholders (agencies, nonprofits, and businesses) to figure out how to continue the work of the Office of Outdoor Recreation past December."

Without the funding, O'Brien-Feeney would simply be laid off and the office would sit vacant, Havel said.

Zach Urness has been an outdoors reporter, photographer and videographer in Oregon for 12 years.

Urness is the author of "Best Hikes with Kids: Oregon" and "Hiking Southern Oregon."

State high court takes up PERS pension cuts

Jeff Mapes

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Lawyers representing Oregon public employees went to the state Supreme Court this week to argue the Legislature went too far in reducing their pension benefits. What they did not find was a justice who seemed clearly sympathetic to their arguments.

Instead, Justice Thomas Balmer, the longest-serving member of the court, said the justices made it clear in a previous ruling that "detrimental" changes can be made to pension benefits as long as they only affect the compensation that employees receive for future work.

"We have never bought into the strong theory of pension rights," which is that they can never be weakened during a worker's entire tenure, Balmer said.

Aruna Masih, the Portland lawyer representing workers in the Oregon Public Employees Retirement System, argued that the Legislature promised

workers they would give workers a certain benefit level when they revamped the system in 2003, and "that is a promise that needs to be honored."

Chief Justice Martha Walters countered that the Legislature gave a starting date for those changes but that "doesn't tell you when you are going to end doing that."

As a result of the pandemic, only three of the justices were in the court's Salem chambers during the oral arguments while the other four justices participated by video — and those four asked few questions.

The oral arguments only offered a glimpse into how the justices might be thinking. And the tenor of their questions may not reflect how they come down in their written decision.

Oregon's high court has frequently dealt with pension issues as PERS has periodically faced big financial shortfalls over the last two decades. At the end of last year, the system had a long-term

debt of about \$24 billion, and that shortfall is likely to rise because of the economic downturn.

To grapple with the debt, state and local governments and school districts have been forced to pay higher PERS rates for their workers over the past several years. Those PERS rates now average 25% of payroll.

In 2019, lawmakers passed a bill aimed at capping the rise in employer rates. The biggest change the Legislature made was to stretch out the repayment period for the pension debt. But under political pressure from major elements of the business community — which wanted PERS reforms in exchange for not fighting new taxes on business for schools — legislators also agreed to trim pension benefits.

The measure diverted some money out of individual retirement accounts and put it toward paying down the debt.

Projections showed this would only cut overall benefits by about 1% to 2% for

most workers. Another provision in the bill lowered to \$195,000 per year the amount of salary that a pension could be based on. So higher-paid workers could see a bigger impact.

Public-employee unions fought hard against the bill, which passed the Democratic-led Legislature by narrow margins. And several unions refused to financially back Democratic lawmakers who voted for the measure before the May primary.

Masih argued that the Legislature unfairly took benefits from workers who aren't responsible for the pension shortfalls, which are largely due to benefits being paid to already retired workers.

Benjamin Gutman, the solicitor general for the state Department of Justice, countered that workers may expect to receive a certain benefit, but that doesn't mean they have "earned or accrued that yet."

The court has no deadline for deciding the case.

Salem has wettest start to June since 2012

Zach Urness

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It didn't feel much like summer the first half of June, but that's beginning to change in a big way.

Western Oregon was hit by a series of active weather systems during the first half of the month that brought the wettest start to the month since 2012.

But with the exception of a few showers this weekend, warm and dry weather is headed to Oregon over the next 10 days — including temperatures that approach 90 next week.

"The upper level ridge is setting up that should keep us mostly dry and warmer for the coming week," National Weather Service meteorologist Will Ahue said.

As far as the first half of the month goes, it was a wet one by recent standards but doesn't stand out overall.

From June 1 to 16, Salem got 1.25 inches of rain. That's the wettest since 2012 recorded the same number and the 23rd wettest in records that date back to the late 1800s.

In other words, it was wet ... but not historically wet.

"It really wasn't a situation that was too out of the ordinary," Ahue said. "I think that just because June has been so



Rain filled Detroit Lake with water and sunny skies will bring people outdoors in the coming weeks. ZACH URNESS/STATESMAN JOURNAL

warm and dry recently, it felt different. But it was a pretty normal early June pattern."

The good news is the late May and early June rain has pushed back the wildfire season while also filling Wil-

lamette Valley reservoirs, which now sit at 91 percent of normal. Detroit Lake has reached its normal summertime water level, at 1,563.5 feet above sea level, after being 40 feet below normal a few months ago.

The bad news is that Oregon is still technically in a fairly deep drought and has melted just about all of its snowpack. In the most recent Drought Monitor report, 78 percent of the state was in a moderate drought.

That might seem odd, given the recent weather, but it's based on long-term trends. Salem, for example, still is 10.67 inches below normal precipitation levels for this time in the water year, which begins Oct. 1. The drought being reflected, in other words, is largely fueled by an extremely dry start to the season, rather than what's happened recently.

Since Oct. 1, Salem has gotten 36.95 inches of rain. In a normal year, it would have received 47.65 inches.

With that deficit, and with most of the snow melted in the mountains, an extended hot and dry period could bring elevated wildfire danger by July. Or, if the weather stays cool and moist, it could be a mellow year, as happened in 2019.

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