

# Lawmakers propose \$500 for those still waiting for benefits

**Claire Withycombe**

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Like many other state lawmakers, Rep. Brad Witt, D-Clatskanie, has been fielding a flurry of calls from residents in his district who are desperate to get unemployment benefits.

Some have been waiting weeks, even months, since getting laid off to see any money from the state. Last week, Witt heard from an unemployed constituent who had 13 dollars left in their bank account.

"The whole process over there is an abject failure and people are literally starving to death because of it," Witt said.

## Lawmakers propose emergency relief

On Thursday, House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, and Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, proposed sending \$500 each to the almost 70,000 Oregonians who have applied for benefits but haven't gotten them.

"People need help now," Kotek said in a statement. "While the department works on processing all the claims, we can make sure desperate Oregonians get some direct cash assistance as soon as possible."

A committee that makes emergency budget allocations will take up the "mini-stimulus" measure, which would use \$35 million in federal coronavirus relief funds, on Tuesday, July 14.

The proposal would order the state's administrative agency to come up with a "simple process" where people who have already applied for benefits could seek the relief.

Earlier this week, the head of the

agency said there's no silver bullet that would quicken the pace of claims getting paid.

"There really isn't a magic legislative fix that would let us quickly go through the claims much more rapidly," David Gerstenfeld, acting director of the state's employment department, told reporters Wednesday.

Other lawmakers have pointed out that the delays in benefits for those who have lost jobs have created other problems requiring policy interventions.

For example, people who aren't getting any income either from a job or from the state are struggling to pay rent, which prompted lawmakers to ban landlords from evicting people for another three months for nonpayment.

"If it weren't for the employment division fumbling so epically, we might not be here," said Rep. Kim Wallan, R-Medford, during a floor debate on the measure to extend eviction protections. "But we have so many tenants who are really desperate because they didn't get the unemployment checks they were entitled to."

## Some suggest systemic changes

Last week, Kevin Mannix, a former state lawmaker — who earlier this year also supported an ill-fated quest to challenge Gov. Kate Brown's executive actions to slow the spread of the coronavirus — suggested Brown create a loan program.

Under his proposal, financial institutions could loan \$2,500 to people who had applied for unemployment before July 1 and whose claims were still pending. The state would back the loan.

Mannix says he wants to push the agency to think creatively about how to solve the backlog.

"The bureaucracy is so tightly strung that there's no flexibility in understanding how to deal with an unusual situation," Mannix said. "Flexibility is the key here."

Lawmakers are constrained by stringent federal rules and a dwindling budget, said Rep. Paul Holvey, D-Eugene, who chairs a legislative committee on business and labor issues.

Holvey, in a phone interview Tuesday, said lawmakers have indeed considered ideas like loans.

"A lot of people wanted the employment department just to advance the money and then figure out if people were eligible afterwards," Holvey said.

But, he says, if the state pays people before they're eligible, that could jeopardize needed funding that the federal government supplies.

Even if the state used a separate, non-federal pot of money to pay people still waiting for unemployment checks, that money will have to come from somewhere in the state's already-dwindling budget, Holvey said.

State revenues are expected to take a major blow due to the economic downturn.

"Should it come from schools?" Holvey said. "Should it come from public safety? Should it come from health care? ...That's really the discussion. What programs do you want to cut to do that? Because the state doesn't print money like the federal government."

Oregon is not the only state wrestling with the sudden onslaught of claims for unemployment benefits. Even those that had updated their technology wrestled with the volume of applications, Gerstenfeld said.

"The scope of the work and the changes to the system were just so massive that even the best new systems

really struggled to keep up," Gerstenfeld said.

Witt has called for a state probe into what specifically prevented the agency from paying Oregonians quickly.

"We have to know in the Legislature precisely what the problem is in order to be able to hold someone accountable," Witt said.

## Will federal changes trickle down?

In light of those challenges across the country, some federal policymakers are rethinking the current system.

Unemployment insurance was established in the throes of the Great Depression, and requires each individual worker to go through a rigorous vetting process before they see a dime of government aid.

Democrats in the U.S. House and Senate have introduced proposals that would essentially pay businesses to keep workers on payroll instead of laying them off and forcing them to go through the unemployment insurance system.

As broader fixes await debate, state lawmakers have been chipping in with elbow grease.

Every day, Witt and his staff make calls: to food banks, to shelters, to community activists, trying to get the residents of his district help with housing and food.

"This whole thing is being held together right now by paper clips, rubber bands and bubble gum," Witt said. "And that's not a way for tens of thousands of Oregonians to have to meet their daily existence."

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Mount Washington is seen on the trail to Blue Lake. PHOTOS BY BOBBIE SNEAD/SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

## Blue Lake

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produce warped boards, this unusual growth pattern is actually a means of survival for trees. Spiraling provides great flexibility in high winds that can quickly snap trunks with straight vertical growth. If a portion of a tree's roots become injured, the branches directly above the damage continue to receive water thanks to the growth pattern of porous vascular tissue curling up the trunk. Water from the healthy roots rises in slow internal swirls to reach the branches all around the tree.

Growing like a corkscrew enabled this venerable tree to survive for at least two centuries before the B and B Fire finally took its life. The snag stands defiantly; eventually it will fall and its crumbling wood will enrich the soil for the next succession of trees.

Huffing and puffing, we reach the caldera's rim and look down 300 feet to the sapphire surface of Blue Lake. The crater holding the lake formed when hot



A meadow behind the caldera that holds Blue Lake.

magma met underground water and erupted in a violent explosion of steam and fragmented rock. Radiocarbon dating indicates the eruption occurred only 1,300 years ago, just yesterday in geologic terms. Fed by submerged springs, the lake is over 300 feet deep.

We walk the faint rim trail. On our left, the slope falls steeply to the water; on our right, the hillside drops to an emerald meadow. It is as though we are hiking along a jewelry setting that holds two giant gemstones in place.

After lunch on the rim, our little

group descends the cinder slope for the return hike. We pause to explore the meadow. Scorched snags around it accentuate its green lushness. Three huge cottonwood skeletons, joined at the base, tower over the meadow's south side. Their thick bark protected them from burning, but the fire's intense heat desiccated them like kiln-dried lumber. The smooth wood is cement-hard; the bare trunks throw long shadows. Their branches still reach for the sun just as they did the day the fire swept over the meadow and its encircling forest. But no

leaves absorb the sun's energy and no living roots take up moisture.

These trees harbor no life, or so it seems at first. Slowly circling the trio, we discover a scrawny shoot of new growth emerging from the base of the middle tree. A few tentative leaves flutter in the wind. These three sisters protected a flicker of life deep within and, seventeen years after the fire, life resumes. Resilience; survival.

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T-13373 filed by Shawn and Kimberly Schurter, 10520 Sunnyview Road NE, Salem, OR 97317, propose an additional point of appropriation under Permit G-18197. The permit allows the use of 0.54 cubic foot per second from three wells in Sec. 19, T7S, R1W, WM for irrigation in Secs. 19, 20 and 30, T7S, R1W, WM. The applicant proposes an additional point of appropriation in Sec. 19, T7S, R1W, WM. The Water Resources Department has concluded that the proposed permit amendment appears to be consistent with the requirements of ORS 537.211.  
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