

Oregonians question proposed state budget cuts

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Dozens of Oregonians voiced concerns about proposed state funding cuts during three days of committee hearings last week, the public's first opportunity to respond to a budget plan that eliminates \$387 million in spending across state agencies.

Needing to rebalance the budget after the coronavirus pandemic disrupted the state's economy, slashing expected tax revenue, lawmakers decided to prioritize K-12 education funding while re-allocating a \$1.2 billion hole.

Despite deciding to dip into the state's emergency Education Stability Fund to the tune of \$400 million, the proposed cuts remain extensive.

A special session of the Oregon Legislature is expected to convene within the first two weeks of August. Lawmakers previously returned to the Capitol for a three-day special session in late June to implement police accountability measures and respond to the coronavirus pandemic.

An outline for the budget was released July 16 after months of deliberation by the three co-chairs of the Legislature's budget-writing Ways and Means Committee.

The largest chunks of the proposed cuts came from within the Department of Human Services and the Oregon



Rayfield

Health Authority. Most notably, two prisons — Shutter Creek Correctional Institution in North Bend and Warner Creek Correctional Facility in Lakeview — were proposed to close over the next two bienniums.

The public described to lawmakers how major cuts would impact the families of those who work in state agencies and the surrounding community, but even relatively smaller cuts received passionate feedback.

Budget cuts affect Oregon families. Rep. Dan Rayfield, D-Corvallis, one of the Ways and Means co-chairs, acknowledged that each proposed cut impacts someone in the state on a personal level.

When the co-chairs were looking for where to cut spending, Rayfield said the conversations were, in large part, a "this or that" debate, with priority given to those areas they believe will best help Oregon recover from the current recession.

"Public input on the budgets is critical, especially when you're looking at cuts of this magnitude," Rayfield said. "From where you sit, different people are going to feel differently about every single cut."

Beyond proposed cuts to existing programs, many vacant positions are expected to be held open and new state

initiatives slated to begin this biennium could be delayed.

One such initiative is an anti-poaching program the Legislature committed \$1.3 million toward in 2019. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife was to use the money to increase enforcement of poaching laws.

When it passed, the law earned the support of hunting and conservation organizations — a rarity for wildlife management legislation.

Humane Voters Oregon and the Oregon Hunters Association both submitted testimony to the Ways and Means Natural Resources subcommittee on Wednesday requesting the program remain funded.

Al Elkins of the Oregon Hunters Association testified that these cuts — along with reductions within Oregon State Police — would put vulnerable wildlife in "crisis."

"Enforcement of Oregon's wildlife laws is taking a big hit with these proposed cuts," Elkins said.

County fairs seek assistance

In the General Government subcommittee, county fair board members from across the state — including from Marion County — urged lawmakers not to cut \$1 million in state funding.

They said the money is still desperately needed, despite the fact that county fairs statewide have been canceled

this year due to the pandemic.

The money is used to offset production costs that were already incurred in the months of planning for the fair, pay bills through the end of the year that other revenue sources would normally cover and keep the organizations surviving long enough to hold a fair in 2021.

In addition to county fairs being canceled, other events that normally take place at the fairgrounds were canceled or postponed, further hurting the fairground financially. At least nine counties are still holding some kind of 4H or FFA event, some virtually.

The Oregon Fairs Association testified that the return on investment of \$1 million is extremely high due to the educational nature of fairs for local youth and support the fair and fairgrounds provide to the surrounding community.

Furthermore, county fairs could be at risk of not returning in 2021 if state funding disappears.

The fair association's president Bart Noll and executive director Patrick Sieng wrote: "The damage of cutting \$1 million from the county fairs budget may seem small, but in reality may very well have the effect of permanently closing fairs for rural counties."

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Sticky, whose rescue story went viral in the fall of 2018, wears a tracker device on his collar so his humans can locate him when he escapes their Silverton home.

SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

Kitty

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ciary of the foundation. The family eventually adopted the dog, and Hawley has since written a book about her transition into the family. (Just like he did when they adopted Sadie, a border collie-black Lab mix.)

Two of the books in the "Sticky the Kitty" trilogy have been voted best children's books in annual reader polls at Critters.org, an on-line workshop/critique group. A fourth book titled "A Very Sticky Christmas" is in the works.

The books have been shipped to 22 countries around the world, and Hawley said they've been used in schools in Kenya and Pakistan to teach children English.

The first one was translated into Spanish by students in Pennsylvania. Their class planned to deliver books donated by Hawley to orphanages in the Dominican Republic, but their trip was canceled in the wake of the pandemic. The Spanish version of "Sticky the Kitty: A Sticky Situation" is available on the book website.

He never imagined he'd become a children's book author and doubts it will ever be profitable, although he can always dream. He donates 10 percent of the proceeds to the foundation, and the rest covers expenses.

"It's turned into a super fun hobby that pays for itself," Hawley said.

He's expanded beyond the Sticky series while sticking to the theme of positive messages. His son's artwork inspired "You Can Be Anything," and the daughter of a Grammy Award-winning



Chuck Hawley poses with his new kitten, Sticky on Oct. 22, 2018 in Silverton. Hawley found Sticky glued to the side of the road and took him in. STATESMAN JOURNAL FILE

musician inspired "Laila Brave and How She Crushed the Maybes."

It's a long story how Hawley connected with Everlast, aka Erik Schrody, a singer, rapper, songwriter and former front-man for the 1990s hip-hop group House of Pain. In a nutshell, he sent the Sticky books to the musician's daughters, Laila and Sadie, after learning on Instagram that the always-smiling Laila had cystic fibrosis.

He wrote a note saying that since one of his Sticky books already had a character named Sadie, he'd name a character after Laila in a future book.

Hawley kept his promise, and all proceeds of "Laila Brave" are earmarked for the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation.

After corresponding with Schrody via email, Hawley features a Q&A with the father-daughter in his most recent "Sticky's Good Stuff" newsletter. (To sign up for the free newsletter, send an email to stickythekitty503@gmail.com.)

more than 300 adjudicators, but the agency is looking at contracting out for those workers or having other types of employees to do that work to speed up the process.

Right now, it is expected to take people 12 to 14 weeks to get their claims resolved through adjudication — that's about four times as long as the federal standard of 21 days.

"Oregon and many other states historically have not met that target even during normal times," Gerstenfeld said. "And a lot of that is due to the pretty intensive amount of work even to do the adjudication process and the historical under-funding from the federal government for administering the unemployment insurance programs."

Gerstenfeld said that the pandemic "just magnified the problem overnight and exponentially."

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Hawley never expected he'd hear from moms who say the Laila book's lesson, overcoming fears by finding courage to face them, has resonated with their daughters.

He also never expected to land on the big screen.

Through conversations with a production company about a possible reality TV show and maybe even a Hallmark movie, they were cast for a scene near the end of the film "Hidden Orchard Mysteries: The Case of the Air B&B Robbery."

It's a film about two teens who investigate a mysterious robbery in their community and recently was released

on DVD. The scene was filmed in the kitchen of Hawley's home.

Search IMDb, the Internet Movie Database, and you'll find their credits.

Sticky is listed among the cast as the "adorable neighborhood cat."

Hawley and his wife play Sticky's dad and mom. They even have a couple of lines.

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Benefits

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stenfeld told reporters on Wednesday that "tens of thousands" of Oregonians who have applied for unemployment benefits are still stuck in a bureaucratic process called adjudication.

Simply put, that's when the agency has to take extra measures to validate claims for unemployment benefits.

"We don't have an exact count," Gerstenfeld said of the number of people whose claims are still in adjudication. "We know that it's in the tens of thousands."

The Employment Department, which has distributed billions in unemployment benefits to thousands of Oregonians since the pandemic started grabbing a hold of the economy in mid-March, wants to hire more adjudicators to address the backlog.

The agency started with 80 adjudicators pre-pandemic, and now has 210, Gerstenfeld said. The goal is to hire



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