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Should Oregon have a say in healthcare mergers?

Health care stakeholders and access advocates are pushing to give the Oregon Health Authority oversight of mergers and acquisitions of certain private health-care entities and require those entities to prove publicly that any deal is beneficial for Oregonians.

They say the proposed legislation is particularly needed after the coronavirus pandemic and corresponding economic recession pummeled smaller hospitals and independent physician offices.

"Experts expect a wave of consolidation and we see no reason why Oregon would be immune to that," said Kirsten Isaacson, research director for Service Employees International Union Local 49, which represents healthcare employees.

Such mergers and acquisitions have significantly consolidated the industry over the past few years and tend to increase costs and harm access for patients, especially for rural areas and historically disenfranchised communities, according to a new report from the union.

The bill takes inspiration, in part, from laws in Cali-

fornia, Washington and Massachusetts.

Rising healthcare prices

The report states that between 2016 and 2018, the share of physicians associated with a health system grew by more than 27%, attributable largely to consolidation.

In Oregon, the number of independent hospitals has fallen by 43% since 2000 for the same reason.

Additionally, in the past four years, the amount Oregonians paid for health care increased by 29% — greater than the rate increase of the country as a whole.

"We already have a price problem in the state. Consolidation is well-documented to increase prices and we, frankly, can't afford that," Isaacson said.

The sponsor of House Bill 2362, Rep. Andrea Salinas, D-Lake Oswego, said the legislation fits within the goal of Gov. Kate Brown and Democratic legislative leaders of approaching this session from a perspective

of equity.

The goal of the bill is simple, Salinas said: Keep health care costs from rising and maintain access levels.

Mergers and acquisitions aren't inherently bad, she said, so long as they benefit, or are at least neutral to consumers.

"I hope (the bill) injects some competition back into our health care system so we can start to bring down the price of health care," Salinas said.

What the bill would do

HB 2362 would require health care entities to get approval from the Oregon Health Authority before any mergers, acquisitions or affiliations.

OHA could deny approval if the businesses can't prove the deal would: reduce patient costs; increase access to services in underserved areas; or rectify fac-

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Silverton High School's David Russell runs drills with his teammates during practice earlier this month.

ABIGAIL DOLLINS / STATESMAN JOURNAL

Prep football cleared for return in Oregon

Gov. Brown gives schools OK to play outdoor contact sports again

Chris Hansen
Register-Guard
USA TODAY NETWORK

Gov. Kate Brown announced that the Oregon Health Authority is revising its guidance for outdoor sports as well as its exemption for college sports.

In other words, there is now a path for high school football to return to the field, as well as other prep sports and lower division college sports.

Outdoor contact sports can resume with teams asked to follow the COVID-19 health and safety protocols already put in place by each county.

Teams in low or moderate risk counties are clear to play right away. Teams in high risk or extreme risk counties will have to "opt in" to the football season by adding protocols such as on-site testing for symptomatic individuals, contact-tracing information, isola-

tion and quarantine procedures, and a waiver identifying health and safety risks.

Marion and Polk counties are still extreme risk, as in Lane County.

"It's just been a roller coaster of emotions as I've been sending stuff out to kids and our community members. Everyone is pretty excited," Cascade head football coach Brandon Bennett said. "We're already doing the contact tracing, we're already prepared for our district to start hybrid so the next step is getting access to the rapid tracing for those that are showing symptoms.

"For us at Cascade, the only potential challenge is getting access to the rapid testing. I think that'll be the biggest challenge is how do we get them and how fast can we get them."

In Eugene, Churchill football coach AJ Robinson said, "There are things that we can come up with and be creative as a community now that we have some guidance and some direction of what we're allowed to do. Now the door is open, and that's good."

There was still plenty of confusion locally about Brown's announcement and how and who clears

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Oregonians can check on vaccine online

State, Google create Get Vaccinated Oregon

Virginia Barreda
Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Oregonians can now use an online tool to find out when and where they can get vaccinations for the novel coronavirus.

The tool called Get Vaccinated Oregon allows users to answer basic questions to learn if they are eligible and get linked to information about vaccinations in their counties, according to officials with the Oregon Health Authority. Users can sign up for alerts to get notified about vaccination events or find out

when they may become eligible.

The program, was developed by Google in partnership with the state.

Get Vaccinated Oregon comes as approximately 168,000 adults age 80 and older became eligible to get a COVID-19 vaccine Monday, though nearly 33,000 people age 80 or above have already been vaccinated, officials said.

While vaccine supplies are expected to increase in the coming weeks, supplies are scarce. State health officials asked for patience as more than 700,000 seniors age 65 and older will become eligible for vaccines over the next four weeks.

"My promise to older Oregonians is this: if you want a vaccination, you will get one," Oregon Health

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Buying the 'American Dream' in a hot real estate market

Whitney Woodworth and Bill Poehler

Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

After months of looking for a bigger house in a better location for their family, Diana Sotelo and her husband put in an offer for a new house under construction near Cordon Road NE and Kale Street NE.

They wanted more space to raise their 4-year-old daughter.

Their family was outgrowing their house near Chavez Elementary, and low interest rates tempted them to find something bigger. After working to improve their credit, Sotelo began working with Tu Casa Real Estate.

They held their breath as they awaited acceptance, and on Christmas Eve, they got the news. They are set to move in April.

A global pandemic that many thought would send the housing market tumbling has instead exacerbated inequalities. Home sales have spiked, pricing some out of the competitive market and leaving developers scrambling to catch up.

Talk of a housing bubble is now common among analysts, including those at Swiss banking giant UBS, which has said home prices are outstripping both wages and rents.

According to Willamette Valley MLS, the number of home sales in 2020 reached 11,594 — higher than even pre-Great Recession sales and more than double the 15-year-low of 5,772 in 2010.

The average sale price in 2020 was \$363,034, up from \$251,689 in 2016, according to data from Willamette Valley MLS. Marion County's annual median household income has risen about \$8,000 during the same time period, to \$64,058 in 2019.

Jose Gonzalez, a Salem city councilor and principal broker at Tu Casa Real Estate, said the high cost of rent and low interest rates are leading more people into homeownership. High rent is also leading to a big jump in people looking for larger homes for multigenerational households.

Tu Casa has been in Salem for 26 years, and all its Realtors are bilingual in Spanish — a need that has only increased since the company started.

"For many people, buying a house is part of their American dream," Gonzalez said.

But soaring home prices are pushing that dream further out of reach. And local data shows that households of color continue to be left out of homeownership.

Karen Saxe, director of financial wellbeing for DevNW, a non-profit working to provide affordable housing and financial services in Salem and the surrounding counties, said high housing costs remain a huge barrier.

"We can educate people until we're blue in the face ... but the reality is the market," she said. "The prices in the market and the supply of affordable homeownership opportunities are increasingly scarce."

'Extreme demand' in Salem housing market
After 21 years in real estate in Salem, Antonio Trejo just had his busiest year ever — and 2021 shows no sign of slowing down.

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The Crawford Crossing subdivision is nearing completion in Turner. The town is running out of developable land and looking to expand its boundaries. BRIAN HAYES / STATESMAN JOURNAL

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