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Legislators must work for all Oregon

By Mike McNally
Albany Democrat-Herald

The Oregon Legislature starts its 2019 session this week, so it's time to dust off that old crack about how "No man's life, liberty or property are safe while the Legislature is in session."

(People attribute that remark to Mark Twain, but as is the case with so many Twain quotations, Twain didn't actually say it. Instead, it's the work of Gideon John Tucker, a New York lawyer, politician and newspaper editor, who wrote it in a 1866 case regarding a will. Tucker meant the phrase in part as a parody of a somewhat similar turn of phrase in the Magna Carta. This could be of use to you the next time you're part of a trivia contest.)

In any event, the gavel will fall in both houses of the Legislature, and the session will get underway, with plenty of intriguing questions to be answered in the next few months.

For example, Democrats hold a supermajority in each chamber that (in theory at least) will allow them to approve bills that increase taxes without the necessity to gather even one single vote from a Republican. But these majorities could turn out to be surprisingly fragile — and Democrats who represent areas outside the Portland metro area may find themselves tempted to break ranks

with their leaders on certain issues. And it will just take one or two defections from the Democratic side to sink those supermajorities.

In that light, it was interesting to hear legislators from both parties last week talking about their desire to work to unite a state that increasingly is divided between rural and urban areas.

Peter Courtney, the Salem Democrat who serves as president of the Senate, said he wants to see legislation this session that helps the entire state, not just its urban centers or its rural locales.

Jennifer Williamson, the Portland Democrat who serves as the majority leader in the House of Representatives, said House Democrats have pledged to help build a future for all people in the state, "and not just people from Portland."

It will be interesting to see how long that pledge — to work on behalf of all Oregonians and not just those in the Portland area — will last in the Capitol. If it manages to last through the entire session, people in Oregon's rural areas will be astonished, because they're expecting Portland legislators to shove their agendas down their throats.

And there's a reason why rural Oregonians expect this: It's because that's exactly what has happened in previous legislative sessions.

To that end, here are some of the key questions that people in the "other Oregon" will be asking as the session progresses:

- How much deeper will they have to dig into their pockets to help pay for tax increases legislators are likely to seek this session? Gov. Kate Brown is making the case that Oregon's public schools desperately need an infusion of cash. Can legislators make the case that spending more money on public schools will also benefit schools in less-populated areas?
- A proposal for a carbon tax seems to be a good bet to pass this session. But what accommodations can legislators make to ease the potentially outsized impact the measure might have on rural areas?
- What kind of gun control measures will gain traction in the Legislature? In the words of Rep. Carl Wilson, a Republican from Grants Pass: "There are people who want to disarm us incrementally over time," and he added "rural Oregon is steeped in gun culture."
- What can legislators do to boost rural economies, instead of just adopting one-size-fit-all policies that place unfair burdens on small business?

The talk last week from legislators was encouraging. But it's early in the session. At this point, it's just talk — and nobody knows that better than people in rural Oregon.

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