GUEST EDITORIAL FROM THE ALBANY DEMOCRAT-HERALD

Rent control bill looks certain to pass

The state Legislature seems almost certain to pass a bill to enact a statewide rent control policy.

This week, the Senate Housing Committee, after a four-hour hearing, voted to move Senate Bill 608 to the full Senate for consideration, where it seems a sure bet to pass, considering the Democratic majority there. And the same thing is almost certain to happen in the House, considering that Speaker of the House Tina Kotek has made this issue a priority now for years.

The hearing this week wasn't without drama: Democrats on the Housing Committee refused to entertain any of a number of Republican amendments to the bill, according to Sen. Fred Girod, R-Stayton. After it became clear that none of the offered amendments would pass, Girod abruptly left the hearing room, according to an account of the hearing in The Oregonian. The only Republican left in the hearing room after Girod left was Sen. Tim Knopp of Bend, who voted "no," but he can count votes just like the rest of us.

Judging by a press release, one of Girod's main concerns is that the bill as written evokes the emergency clause, meaning it goes into effect immediately upon passage. That means, Girod said, that property owners will have no time to adjust to new regulations, and could face the potential of massive fines as a result.

Girod also said that the bill has been written with urban Oregon in mind "and does not offer alternatives for rural or frontier communities." You could be hearing that complaint a lot during the remainder of this legislative session.

But give Kotek some credit: She apparently learned from her failed 2017 attempt to eliminate no-cause evictions and to allow cities to create their own rent control policies and went to work to craft a proposal that would win over skeptics — most notably, critics in the Senate, where her proposal failed after passing the House.

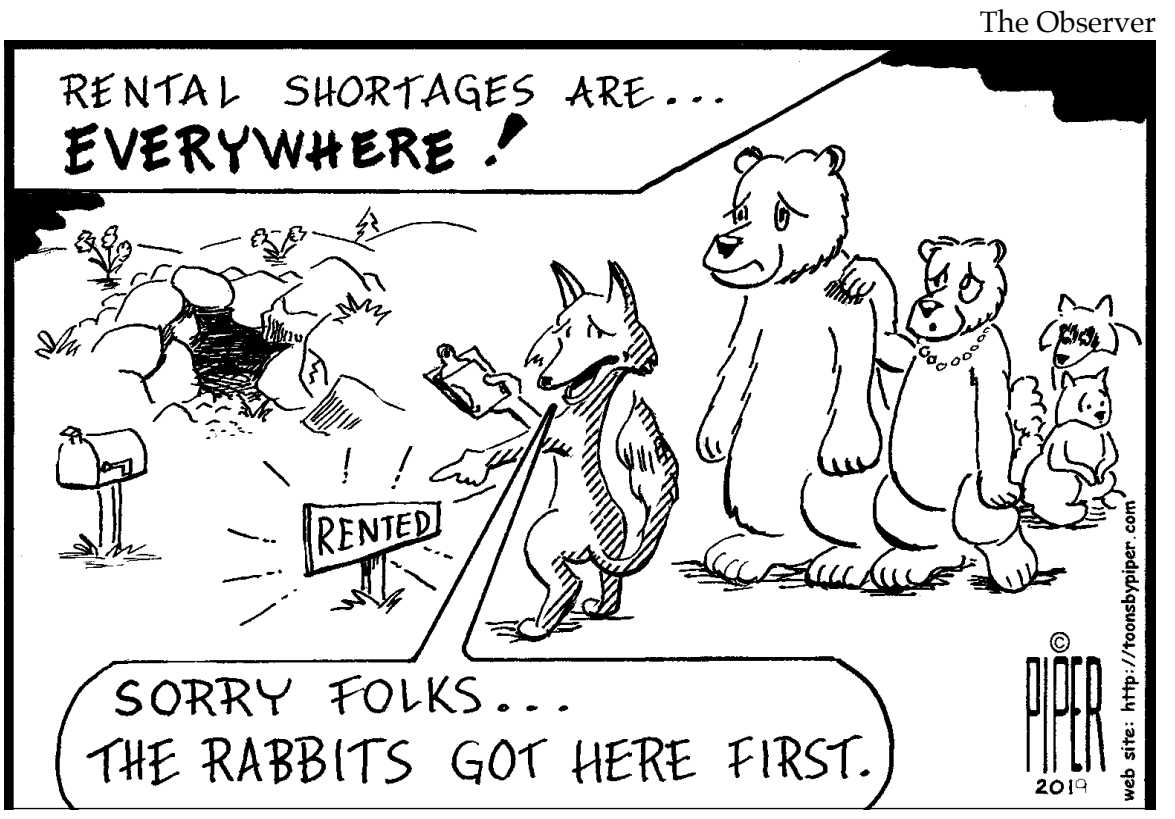
Senate Bill 608 (whose sponsors notably include Senate President Peter Courtney) requires most landlords to cite a cause when evicting renters after the first year of tenacy. It also limits annual rent increases to 7 percent plus inflation throughout the state — a concession that was sufficient to persuade two statewide rental groups to remain neutral on the bill. The legislative director for the Oregon Rental Housing Association, for example, said the bill as written would likely not be "catastrophic to our livelihood." That's not exactly a rave, but it was sufficient to convince the association to stay on the sidelines.

Tenant groups aren't exactly thrilled by the bill, either, but say it offers renters at least a modicum of predictability as they plan their household budgets.

Here's the big question about this bill, though, and it's only a matter of time before we find out the answers: A raft of academic research suggests that strict rent control reduces the supply of rentals in the long run and drives rent prices up. Kotek and supporters of the bill argue that its relatively generous allowances for rent increases (many California communities with rent control limit increases to the rate of inflation) mean that the traditional criticisms about rent control won't apply here. We'll see about that, but it would be a shame if this measure, intended to protect renters, winds up putting more pressure on an already extra-tight market.

In fact, if you believe that part of the problem facing renters in Oregon is a shortage of available housing, the Legislature has an option available to it that doesn't involve throwing a big curveball at landlords: Allocate money to build affordable housing units throughout the state. As the owner of those housing units, the state (or whatever agency got tasked with managing the units) could do whatever it wanted regarding rent. That wouldn't run the risk of wreaking havoc with private landlords who depend on the cash flow from their properties for their livelihoods.

The Observer



A hands-on education for EOU

There are a handful of state senators who have a university in their senate district, and I am pleased to be one of them. Eastern Oregon University is one of my top priorities. So, when Professor Jeff Dense approached me several years ago about bringing a class to Salem for a hands-on learning experience, I jumped at the chance.

We just completed what I believe to be the fifth EOU class to spend a day and a half in the Capitol. This year's class, though smaller, was very engaged and interactive. I wish I would have had this kind of opportunity when I was in college, and I applaud the work of Professor Dense to make it happen.

Students came for "State Legislature 101", and my office set up the schedule and meetings. They sat with senators at their desks on the Senate floor during a session and observed the process of laws being made, up close and firsthand. In addition, students met with Senate leaders of both parties, including a lively discussion with Senate President Peter Courtney. The class sat in on hearings and observed the Joint Committe on Ways and Means.

I spent time with the students, walking them through step by step how a bill begins, moves through the legislative process and becomes law. I used as an example the Roadkill Bill I sponsored in 2017. At every juncture we answered questions and encouraged interaction not only with me, but with all the legislators they met.

Courtesy photo

Sen. Bill Hansell is pictured here with EOU students (left) Brandon Cederholm of La Grande and (right) Chip Foss of West Linn.

LOOK TOWARD LEGISLATION
SEN. BILL HANSELL

My office also scheduled time for the class to go to the House of Representatives side, where they spent time with Rep. Greg Barreto. This visit showed the students the differences in the two chambers' rules.

My legislative director, Evan Bryan, a EOU grad and former EOU Student Body President, was the organizer of this year's EOU class visit. I am particularly pleased, because Evan was one of the first students to come to Salem for this class.

President Courtney referred to the Senate Chamber during his presentation as a "classroom." I couldn't agree more. As lawmakers, we educate each other about our districts and values. The students saw how the process can work best when lawmakers understand how their positions on issues or votes will impact the entire state.

I look forward to continuing to host a class from Eastern. This is such a valuable learning opportunity and I have no doubt that these classes contain future leaders of our state. It is important that we work to educate the leaders of tomorrow and foster the importance of civic engagement.

Apathy is unhealthy for a democracy. Citizen engagement is critical for the legislative process to succeed at all levels of government. By listening to one another and being open to differing views, we can build a stronger Oregon. I think this class saw how effective communication and a thoughtful approach can ultimately bring people together.

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A division of
Western Communications Inc.

THE OBSERVER
An independent newspaper founded in 1896
(USPS 299-260)

The Observer reserves the right to adjust subscription rates by giving prepaid and mail subscribers 30 days notice. Periodicals postage paid at La Grande, Oregon 97850. Published Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays (except Dec. 25) by Western Communications Inc., 1406 Fifth St., La Grande, OR 97850 (USPS 299-260)

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Send address changes to:
The Observer, 1406 Fifth St., La Grande, OR 97850
Periodicals postage paid at:
La Grande, Oregon 97850

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