



Bryan Vance/Oregon Public Broadcasting

A business-backed effort to get Oregon voters to reduce the costs of the state's public pension system has quietly closed shop — at least for the 2020 election.

PERS

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As a result, he said, backers concluded it makes more sense to see how the finances of the system play out over the next several years — instead of trying to tackle the costs of the pension system during a 2020 general election dominated by a high-intensity presidential election.

How to solve the puzzle of PERS has been a hot topic in state politics repeatedly over the past two decades. Democratic Gov. Kate Brown last year defeated a Republican challenger, Knute Buehler, who wanted to make major cuts in PERS benefits. But she vowed to take action to reduce the rise in employer rates, which now average about 25% of payroll.

Brown signed a measure, Senate Bill 1049, earlier this year that makes some modest benefit reductions while also stretching out the time to pay off the unfunded

pension liability.

Without the bill, pension costs were projected to rise to about 29% of payroll, costing public agencies another billion dollars over the two-year budget cycle, Nesbitt said.

Instead, employee rates are projected to stay about the same, particularly if this year's stock market advances stick through the rest of the year. The pension system is heavily dependent on investment earnings, so the stronger the market, the more money generated to pay benefits.

"The legislation seems well-designed to avert another round of increases which would devastate budgets" for schools and other services in the next several years, Nesbitt said. "We should give the legislation time to see how it works."

The withdrawal of the PERS initiatives pleased the public employee unions, which have bitterly opposed any reductions in worker benefits.

"I think it's time for them to stop these corporate-backed attacks on hard-working public employees," said Patty Wentz, a spokeswoman for the PERS Coalition, which represents several unions.

She argued that attempts to cut pensions only make it harder to attract and retain talented teachers, firefighters and other public employees. And she said that voters made it clear when they rejected Buehler's gubernatorial candidacy that they weren't interested in cutting pensions.

Nesbitt said his supporters could return in later years for another attempt at initiative reform. He noted that the Oregon Supreme Court is considering the constitutionality of the PERS measure signed by Brown this year. The court's decision could roll back some or all of the benefit cut. And it will also provide more clarity on what benefit changes it is willing to accept.

The business-backed measures prevented a variety of approaches to reducing costs. They include shifting new workers to 401(k)-style retirement plans and diverting some contributions to existing public employee retiree investment accounts toward paying the costs of the main pension plans, which guarantee workers a set pension amount depending on their pay and years of service.

One other pension-related measure has been filed for the 2020 ballot. It's sponsored by two former Republican state representatives — Julie Parrish of West Linn and Mark Johnson of Hood River — and Portland activist Kim Sordyl. Their measure would amend the state constitution to require future benefits for all public pensions to be paid without going into debt. The intent is to force public agencies to either lower their pension costs or to ensure they are paid without borrowing.

FEES

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"Revenues have remained flat while costs for providing environmental health services have increased approximately 5% a year," according to a written report presented to the Union County Board of Commissioners.

The proposed fee structure adjustment also would reduce the costs for some new restaurant owners. Presently, anyone opening a restaurant in Union County must pay a full fee regardless of when the facility opens. CHD is requesting permission to

charge new restaurants that open after Oct. 1 only half of the annual restaurant license fee.

Brogioiti said this step might encourage restaurant owners to open their businesses late in the year instead of waiting for the start of the year to avoid paying a full fee.

CHD's public health administrator said the 15% fee increases proposed are important not only from a fiscal stability standpoint. She explained the Oregon Health Authority sets recommend fee standards for the services agencies such as the CHD provide. Brogioiti said agencies are expected to

be no more than 20% above below the target standards to be in compliance with OHA rules.

Commissioner Donna Beverage said she wanted additional time to study the proposal and see how the Union County's inspection fees compare with those of other counties in the region before the board votes on the request. The commission may vote on the fee increase proposal when it meets Dec. 18.

Commissioner Matt Scarfo, citing a conflict of interest because he owns two restaurants, recused himself from the discussion of the fee increase and will not vote on it.

LAWSUIT

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Supreme Court said in Janus v. the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees that requiring public sector workers to pay dues to a union when they didn't want to be members is unconstitutional.

The Freedom Foundation argues the unions are violating the employees' rights under the First Amendment by enforcing the "restrictive language" in the cards union members sign when they sign up for the union, limiting the plaintiffs' freedoms of speech and association.

The plaintiffs claim the process is burdensome and confusing and can keep workers on the union's membership rolls much longer than they want to be.

The lawsuit alleges the American Federation of Teachers requires its members to stay in the union for at least a year after joining and only allows them to resign their membership

during the month of June.

Claudia Strickland, a plaintiff in the suit, joined the union in November 2018, the lawsuit claims.

Strickland notified the union in July she wanted to stop being a member. But the union denied her request because she hadn't been a member for at least a year. Under the union's rules, she has to keep paying dues until June 2020.

"So first of all, it's extremely confusing," said Rebekah Millard, a lawyer for the Freedom Foundation. "Second of all, they're choosing to enforce it in the most onerous way possible."

Strickland, and another plaintiff, Linda Newton, who signed up after the Janus decision, weren't informed of their right to decline joining the union in the first place, Millard said. The other two plaintiffs joined in April, about three months before the Supreme Court's decision.

Neither the AFT-Oregon nor the AFT Local 4671 could be reached for com-

ment Thursday.

The Freedom Foundation, headquartered in Olympia, Washington, is backing similar lawsuits in the region. And there are roughly 30-50 similar lawsuits across the country, Millard said.

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