

Voters to decide whether health care is a right in Oregon

Passage could force legislators to put health care spending ahead of other needs

By **PETER WONG**
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Mitch Greenlick may achieve in death what he was unable to do during his 17 years in the Oregon House.

A vote in the House cleared the way for Oregon voters to decide in November 2022 whether health care should be considered a right in the Oregon Constitution. The House passed Senate Joint Resolution 12 on a 34-23 vote along party lines on Wednesday, May 19. The resolution does not require the governor's signature.

Greenlick, a Democrat from Portland, was in his ninth and final term when he died a year ago at age 85.

As leader or co-leader of the House Health Care Committee for more than six cycles, going back to 2007, he sponsored and the House passed similar resolutions four times. All of them died in the Senate, although his final attempt had reached the full Senate

before the Legislature abruptly adjourned its 2020 regular session after Republican walkouts.

"This is not the first version of this that you tried," Rep. Rob Nosse, a Democrat from Portland who joined the Health Care Committee upon his appointment to the House in 2015, said during the debate.

"Passage of this resolution and hoped-for passage on the ballot in the fall of 2022 is an awesome legacy to your work. Each of us knows that access to quality and affordable health care is a basic human need for all the people of this state. It is a need that is worthy of being a right in our state Constitution."

Nosse was the lead House sponsor and Sen. Elizabeth Steiner Hayward, D-Beaverton, was the lead Senate sponsor. Her district includes Greenlick's former district in Northwest Portland and northeast Wash-



Alex Wittwer/The Observer, File

A stack of ballots sits in the Union County Clerk's Office, La Grande, as workers count the ballots for the special election Tuesday, May 18, 2021. Oregon voters can decide in November 2022 on a ballot measure that would change the state constitution to make health care a fundamental right.

ington County.

Greenlick came to Oregon in 1964 to start and later direct the Kaiser Permanente Center for Health Research. He became a vice president of Kaiser Foundation Hospital in 1981. He became a professor and chairman of public health and preventive medicine at Oregon Health & Science University from 1990 until he was elected to the House in 2002.

The proposed consti-

tutional amendment also says this:

"The obligation of the state ... must be balanced against the public interest in funding public schools and other essential public services, and any remedy arising from an action brought against the state to enforce the provisions of this section may not interfere with the balance described in this subsection."

Rep. Andrea Salinas, D-Lake Oswego, said the

amendment would not compel legislators to support health care spending at the expense of state aid to public schools and other state services.

"The resolution is in no way prescriptive in how the Legislature gets from here to there," Salinas said.

But Rep. Cedric Hayden of Lowell, the top Republican on the Health Care Committee, said he believes the constitutional amendment would open state government to lawsuits.

"It is no longer something that every resident of Oregon would have no right of action — they do," Hayden, a dental surgeon, said. "It is no longer something that would not put pressure on all of our other budgets."

"I do not believe that our schools, our students and our parents have a private right of action to sue the state to make sure their school gets funded appropriately. If people feel that public safety in their county or city is not up to a standard that it should be, they do not

have a private right of action to sue the state that it is funded."

He estimated it would cost up to \$4 billion for state-supported insurance coverage to reach everyone under the Oregon Health Plan, which is jointly funded by federal and state governments.

Oregon's uninsured adults are estimated at 6% of the population. Most children are now covered.

House Republican Leader Christine Drazan of Canby said passage of the constitutional amendment could compel legislators to put health care spending ahead of other programs.

"Either this is aspirational — and we should vote on it today as such, but not send it to voters to enshrine it in our Constitution — or it is an obligation of the state," she said. "If it is an obligation of the state and does nothing and costs us nothing, there is no value in it."

"Be prepared to say no to other things, because otherwise it is pointless."

Oregon revenue forecast: State coffers and 'kicker' to surge

Taxpayers getting back total of \$1.4 billion in credits against 2021 tax bills

By **PETER WONG**
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — For Oregon's state budget, and for Oregon taxpayers, it appears everything's coming up roses these days.

An economic surge as the coronavirus pandemic wanes will produce \$1 billion more for state coffers than state economists projected just three months ago. That will be enough to boost state spending, without cuts, as lawmakers finish work on the state budget for the next two years.

Meanwhile, that surge will result in an estimated \$1.4 billion — more than twice the amount projected back on Feb. 24 — going back to taxpayers next year in the form of "kicker" credits against their 2021 tax bills. The final figure will be determined in the September economic and

revenue forecast, but the share of tax liability is projected at 13.6%.

For the average taxpayer with a household income of \$67,400, the credit will be \$636. For the median with household income between \$35,000 and \$40,000 — half are above and half below that range — the credit will be \$312.

"I have never seen such a strong outlook," State Economist Mark McMullen told members of the House and Senate revenue committees during his quarterly forecast on Wednesday, May 20.

"There are a whole lot more resources available than when we last reported in March, and even more than we reported at the beginning of the session, when the budget was drafted. It's quite a remarkable turnaround from a few months ago."

"When the pandemic hit, we saw these massive job losses that blew a \$2 billion hole in the budget. That hole was filled by the March forecast (on Feb. 24), and now we are past where we thought we would be even pre-pandemic."

Gov. Kate Brown proposed \$25.6 billion in spending from the tax-supported general fund and lottery proceeds, the state's two most flexible sources, back on Dec. 1. Legislative budget writers, bolstered by \$2.6 billion in federal aid from President Joe Biden's pandemic recovery plan, unveiled a framework for almost \$28 billion in spending on March 24.

Brown said in a statement that the latest forecast, coupled with projections for the following two budget cycles, sets the stage for a better Oregon:

"Our anticipated state revenues will allow us to fully fund our state agency base budgets, make investments prioritized by the

Racial Justice Council, move forward with a \$9.3 billion school budget, fully fund the Student Success Act, and ensure no one is kicked off the Oregon Health Plan, among other things.

"These investments will help Oregonians recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and move Oregon toward a future where equity is realized and all are equal."

Some Democrats want to spend more; Republicans say spending should focus on one-time purposes. Budget writers have already proposed to save some of the federal aid for the 2023-25 budget period.

Senior economist Josh Lehner said what has helped prop up the economy in Oregon and other states is the massive federal spending during the pandemic, including payments

to individuals and businesses. Biden's plan gave \$1,400 payments to an estimated 95% of Oregonians.

"It has been unprecedented outside of wartime," Lehner said. "It has allowed households and firms to keep their heads above water. It does not mean that some people haven't fallen through the cracks — they have — and some businesses have closed."

McMullen said economists have not seen the steep downturn triggered by the onset of the pandemic — Oregon's unemployment rate went from a modern-low 3.5% in March 2020 to a modern-high 13.2% the following month — and the equally speedy recovery. The April 2021 rate was 6%; it has hovered around that mark for a few months.

McMullen said he still projects it will be the

fourth quarter of 2022 before Oregon returns to its pre-pandemic employment levels, still shorter than the seven years following downturns in 1980 and 2007.

"Obviously, a lot of things can happen in two years," he said. "But right now we are on a pretty strong footing. The consensus (of economists) ranges from good to great."

McMullen said the amount of the projected kicker could change, given that Oregon tax filings just closed May 17, a month later than usual because of the pandemic. It would not be the largest since the kicker was created in 1979 and put into the Oregon Constitution in 2000; \$1.1 billion was rebated in 2007 and \$1.7 billion in 2019, both just before Oregon's economy took sharp nosedives.

Oregon officials bet lottery will boost COVID-19 shots

By **ANDREW SELSKY**
Associated Press

SALEM — Oregon officials are betting that the desire to win \$1 million in a lottery will boost the percentage of Oregonians who are vaccinated against the coronavirus.

With only half of the people living in Oregon either fully or partially vaccinated, Oregon Lottery officials approved a plan Friday to hold a lottery. Those who have been vaccinated by June 27 will be eligible.

"It's never been easier to get a vaccine, so don't miss your shot to enter," Gov. Kate Brown said.

She told reporters this is an effort to raise the percentage of adult Oregonians who get vaccinated to 70% in order to fully reopen the state.

The Oregon Health Authority reported 50% of Oregonians are vaccinated, with 39% having completed the series and 11% in progress.

If Oregonians have received at least a first dose of Pfizer, Moderna or Johnson & Johnson, they are automatically entered to win through the state's vaccine database. Brown, responding to a question at a Zoom news conference, said people who are in Oregon illegally and have been vaccinated also are eligible to win the prize.

Other states also are



YouTube/Screenshot

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown speaks Friday, May 21, 2021, to announce the state's new \$1 million lottery for those who are vaccinated against the coronavirus. About half of the people living in Oregon are either fully or partially vaccinated.

trying the tactic, including New York, Maryland and Ohio.

Oregon ranks 19th in the nation in percentage of people who have received one dose, said Pat Allen, director of the Oregon Health Authority. Oregon is on track to having 70% of its residents being vaccinated by the end of June, Allen said.

The Oregon campaign is funded with \$1.86 million in federal pandemic relief and is a collaboration between the Oregon Health Authority and the Oregon Lottery.

Oregonians 18 and older will have the chance to win \$1 million or one of 36 \$10,000 prizes, with one winner in each county. Residents age 12 to 17 will have a chance to win one of five \$100,000 Oregon College Savings Plan scholarships.

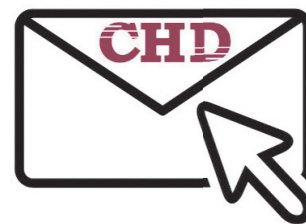
The drawing will take place June 28.

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2021

EASTERN OREGON
PHOTO CONTEST

Official Rules:

Photo Contest open now and closes at 11:59 pm Sunday, June 20, 2021.

Staff will choose the top 10. The public can vote online for People's Choice from 12:01 am Monday, June 21 through 11:59 pm Thursday, June 30.

Digital or scanned photos only, uploaded to the online platform. No physical copies.

Only photographers from Oregon may participate.

The contest subject matter is wide open but we're looking for images that capture life in Eastern Oregon.

Entrants may crop, tone, adjust saturation and make minor enhancements, but may not add or remove objects within the frame, or doctor images such that the final product doesn't represent what's actually before the camera.

The winners will appear in the July 8th edition of Go Magazine; the top 25 will appear online.

Gift cards to a restaurant of your choice will be awarded for first, second and third place.

Submit all photos
online at:

lagrandeobserver.com/photocontest