

Lawmakers OK rent, drought relief in one-day session

Oregon tenants waiting for state aid with past-due rent will remain safe from eviction until Sept. 30

By PETER WONG

Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Oregon lawmakers cleared the way in a scripted special session for \$100 million more in state rental assistance and \$100 million more for local efforts to prevent evictions.

During the one-day special session on Monday, Dec. 13, lawmakers also approved \$25 million for enforcement against illegal cannabis-growing in Southern Oregon and \$18 million for resettlement of up to 1,200 refugees who fled after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. They also released \$100 million already set aside for relief from the continuing drought in outlying areas of Oregon.

Portland, Gresham, Hillsboro and Beaverton are among the 14 cities that will receive \$1 million each to deal with homelessness.

Gov. Kate Brown called the special session, the year's second, to approve more rental assistance and extend the grace period for evictions stemming from the coronavirus pandemic. But the final agenda came together just a few days beforehand, when Brown and legislative leaders from both parties agreed to include a few other items.

"There was no plan. No agreement. Success was not guaranteed. Your Legislature worked hard since that day," Senate President Peter Courtney, the veteran Salem Democrat, said. "Oregonians can be proud of their legislators today, Democrat and Republican. We came together to send relief — hope — to Oregonians in crisis."

Minority Republicans had resisted a special ses-

sion, though not the rental assistance, which they said could have been approved by the 20-member Emergency Board. Majority Democrats said only the full Legislature could extend the grace period for evictions. The E-Board cannot pass legislation.

Impetus for session

Although some cities and counties are still accepting them, the Oregon Department of Housing and Community Services stopped new applications for rental assistance after Dec. 1. Agency officials said that pending applications were likely to consume the rest of the \$289 million available from federal funds — \$180 million has been paid out to landlords as of Dec. 11 — and the state still would not have enough to cover all pending requests.

House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, called for a special session months ago.

"Today, we kept our promise and protected thousands from losing their homes this winter," she said, along with other priority items. "I'm appreciative of the bipartisan work that led to this successful emergency special session to provide relief for every part of the state."

The \$200 million that lawmakers drew from the state budget a year ago for rental assistance has been spent. Oregon has applied for \$200 million more in federal aid from the U.S. Treasury, but that money is unlikely to come until spring — and even if it comes, it will be the last installment.

Meanwhile, more than 10,000 applications, many of them in the three Portland metro counties, are past the grace periods established by state law and county actions. State law allows 60 days from when a tenant has informed a landlord about an application being filed; in Multnomah and Washington counties and the city of Beaverton, it is 90 days.

"During wintertime, we

want to make sure Oregonians are kept whole," said Sen. Kayse Jama, D-Portland, who leads the Senate housing panel. "We also want to make sure that landlords who are struggling get the resources they need."

Senate Republican Leader Tim Knopp, of Bend, helped broker the deal after Republicans resisted the initial call for a special session.

"We do have people with the possibility of being evicted," he said. "We do have landlords who still have to be made whole. There have been several hundred million dollars already spent. In order to protect them and protect landlords, the only option we have today in this emergency session is to provide these funds and that certainty to tenants in a defined period."

Dissent is voiced

A companion bill (Senate Bill 891) extends the grace period for tenants against evictions for nonpayment of rent from Feb. 28 to June 30, 2022. The grace period goes back to April 1, 2020, at the start of the pandemic. The grace period for tenants who have shown landlords proof of application for assistance is now set at Sept. 30, 2022, or whenever the landlord receives the assistance payment.

That bill passed the Senate, 22-6, and the House, 37-18.

At least 10 House Republicans spoke against that bill and called on Brown to replace Margaret Salazar as leader of the state housing agency.

"House Republicans urge significant changes to these



Julia Shumway/Oregon Capital Chronicle

State Rep. Julie Fahey, D-Eugene, encourages her colleagues to vote for a bill to extend Oregon's safe harbor protections from eviction during a special legislative session on Monday, Dec. 13, 2021.

agencies under Democrat control," GOP Leader Vikki Breese-Iverson, of Prineville, said. "We call on the governor to dramatically increase oversight to ensure this money gets to real people in need."

Brown said she is aware that the agency, plus community action agencies in the counties, must reduce the

huge backlog of applications.

"While we have made significant progress in improving the delivery of rental assistance in the last several weeks, we know that renters and their landlords are counting on these additional state resources and that we must move quickly," Brown said in a statement.

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