

Oregon Capitol to remain open during February legislative session

Committee meetings, public testimony continue in virtual format

By **SAM STITES**
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — The Oregon Capitol will remain open to the public when lawmakers convene Feb. 1 for a monthlong session.

In a joint statement Monday, Jan. 10, Senate President Peter Courtney and House Speaker Tina Kotek announced while all legislative committee meetings during the upcoming 2022 session will take place virtually, the public will be allowed in the building.

Kotek and Courtney issued a statement last week expressing concern over the omicron variant of COVID-19 and troubling projections by doctors at Oregon Health & Science University. The two presiding officers of the Oregon Legislature clarified their stance Jan. 10.

“We are committed to ensuring the legislative process is accessible and safe during the upcoming session,” the statement said. “The recent wave of cases and hospitalizations due to the Omicron variant is concerning. After speaking directly with OHSU infectious disease doctors and public health officials, we decided to move our committees to a virtual format.”

Oregonians will be able to enter the Capitol during regular business hours and may watch legislative proceedings from the galleries of either chamber located on the third floor.

Committee meetings will be livestreamed on the Legislature’s information site, and public testimony will be accepted in written format and via video or phone.

According to press release, all Capitol visitors will be required to comply with public health and safety guidance which includes wearing masks

inside to reduce risk of COVID-19 transmission.

Capitol employees who can work remotely have been asked to do so during the session to help curb the spread of the virus which continues with the new omicron variant.

According to Dr. Peter Graven, director of OHSU’s Office of Advanced Analytics, Oregon could see as many 1,650 hospitalizations due to the virus by the end of January.

On Jan. 7, 625 patients were hospitalized with COVID-19 across the state, according to the Oregon Health Authority. The state’s COVID burden peaked in September with around 1,200 hospitalizations.

The statehouse was closed to the public beginning in March 2020 and remained closed throughout the entire 2021 legislative session, with most staff working remotely in support of lawmakers who were still in the building.

The concept of remote work and wearing masks has been controversial topic in Salem.

Republicans have repeatedly argued the public has a constitutionally protected right to attend legislative proceedings in person. Lawmakers also have framed it as an equity issue for Oregonians who don’t have internet access.

Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athena, said on the morning of Jan. 10 he hoped the Capitol would remain open.

“I think it’s important for our process that we have accessibility. It can be done, the building has been opened before, but at the end of the day I won’t have anything to say about



Hansell



Levy



Smith

it legislatively, it’ll be made by other people,” he said. “My preference would certainly be that we keep the building open if we possibly can.”

Rep. Greg Smith, R-Heppner, said legislative leaders have a lot to weigh in this situation.

“There’s got to be a balance between protection of the First Amendment and the right to peaceably assemble and to be open and transparent with public safety,” Smith said. “I would

just ask our elected leaders to bring balance to that conversation and do everything they can do to allow for open, transparent government while protecting public safety. You know, that’s a tall order, but that’s the balance that needs to be achieved.”

Rep. Bobby Levy, R-Echo, said in an email that she expects the 2022 session to mirror the last year’s legislative process.

“The information we’ve been given so far leads us to believe that this session will look a lot like the 2021 session — except that the public will be able to enter the building,” Levy said. “I am a firm believer that the People’s Building is supposed to be open to the people, and I support opening those doors to the hardworking Oregonians we are honored to be representing.”

She also urged anyone who feel sick to stay home.

“I’m eagerly looking forward to the days where we can trust and rely on Oregonian’s common-sense in relation to their personal health,” she said.

— EO Media Group reporter Alex Wittwer contributed to this report.

State lawmakers revive proposal for stimulus payments to essential workers

By **JAMIE GOLDBERG**
The Oregonian

SALEM — Oregon Democrats are reviving a proposal to provide essential workers who stayed on the job through the pandemic with a one-time stimulus payment of up to \$1,000.

Workers in what the Occupational Safety and Health Administration classifies as medium- to very high-risk occupations would be eligible for the bonus if they worked an average of at least 20 hours per week in person from April to December 2020, made less than \$22 an hour or \$42,900 per year, and haven’t already received a bonus or hazard pay from the state for working during the pandemic.

Rep. Andrea Valderrama, D-Portland, who is co-sponsoring the proposal, said during a House committee meeting Tuesday, Jan.

11, that lawmakers were still seeking clarification from the Oregon Employment Department on the number of workers who could qualify, but an initial analysis had identified at least 230,000 eligible workers.

“In these circumstances where they were asked to show up on the lines, where we called them heroes, our lowest wage workers, the hardest hit, did not receive additional compensation or hazard pay for showing up to these jobs,” Valderrama said. “This bill solves that by providing a one-time appreciation payment to some of our lowest wage workers in the highest risk places.”

The proposal is a pared-down version of a bill that Democratic lawmakers floated last spring that would have set aside federal stimulus money to pay essential workers up to \$2,000 in stim-



Valderrama

ulus payments and a provide a \$1,200 payment to unemployed Oregonians who returned to work in frontline jobs by last fall.

Lawmakers were unable to push that bill over the finish line during a busy legislative session last year, but Democrats vowed at the time to take up the initiative again in 2022.

Funding for the stimulus payments could come from federal American Rescue Plan funds and state general fund money, Valderrama said. She told the committee Jan. 11 that that funding could support payments of up to \$1,000.

The payments would be distributed by the Oregon Worker Relief Fund, which has provided roughly \$100 million to Oregon’s immigrant communities during the pandemic through a combination of state and local funding and donations.

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