

Kotek: 'I believe in the things we have done'

Departing House speaker says her run for governor will focus on continuity and implementation

By **PETER WONG**
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Even a short list of the bills passed by the Oregon Legislature during the record nine years Tina Kotek has been speaker of the House would read much like the achievements of a two-term governor.

But it's no coincidence Kotek is yielding the speakership a year early to focus on her bid for the Democratic nomination for governor in the May 17 primary. Her final day in the House is Friday, Jan. 21. She has held the District 44 seat in North and Northeast Portland since 2007 and has led the House since 2013.

"We've done a lot of good things for Oregonians. It's definitely been a productive run," Kotek said in an exit interview. "But we have to complete our promises. That is what the next governor has to do. I believe in the things we have done and I want to make sure they continue and get fully implemented."

Under a House rule, Kotek could not raise money for her campaign if she remained for the 35-day 2022 session, which starts Feb. 1. According to the Oregon Elections Division, she had \$758,000 on hand by mid-January, compared with \$460,000 for state Treasurer Tobias Read. A total of 11 Democrats have filed so far, excluding Nicholas Kristof, the former New York Times columnist, who was deemed ineligible to run by Secretary of State Shemia Fagan. The Oregon Supreme Court



Tina Kotek is yielding the speakership a year early to focus on her bid for the Democratic nomination for governor in the May 17, 2022, primary. Her final day in the House is Friday, Jan. 21. She has held the District 44 seat in Northeast Portland since 2007 and has led the House since 2013.

soon will determine the fate of Kristof's candidacy, which has reportedly raised more than \$2.5 million.

Some opponents allied with business have taken aim at Kotek with the moniker "no special K," though it's unclear who they prefer. No Republican has won the governorship in 40 years. Former Democratic Sen. Betsy Johnson of Scappoose, who plans an independent bid, has raised at least \$2 million.

Democratic Gov. Kate Brown is barred from running again after almost two full terms. The other major official in the lawmaking process is Senate President Peter Courtney, a Democrat from Salem who is retiring after a total of 38 years, a record 20 of them as Senate leader.

The previous record tenure for a House speaker was six years (1985-91) by Democrat Vera Katz, who went on in 1992 to the first of three terms as mayor of Portland. Katz died in 2017 at age 84.

Kotek says she is running as the candidate who understands the process and the issues — and can get things done.

"With new legislative

leadership in 2023, it will be helpful to have a governor who has been in the Legislature and has been in their positions," Kotek said. "There is going to be change, but I hope there is continuity provided by a governor who understands what it means to be a legislative leader."

Making the leap

Of Oregon's nine most recent governors going back to Republican Mark Hatfield in 1959, all but two were in the Legislature first. But only Vic Atiyeh went directly from the Legislature to the governorship in 1978, and the former Senate Republican leader lost his first statewide bid in 1974. Democrat John Kitzhaber left the Senate presidency before his first election as governor in 1994. The other five, including Brown, held statewide office first.

Courtney and Kotek did not always see eye to eye. But in a statement after Kotek's Jan. 6 announcement, he said, "She has been an advocate in many ways before anything else."

Before she won her second bid for the House in 2006 — she lost in an

adjoining district in 2004 — Kotek was an advocate for the Oregon Food Bank and Children First for Oregon. In her first term in 2007, Kotek led the effort to overhaul how Oregon gives cash assistance to low-income families. In the 2009 and 2011 sessions, prior to becoming Democratic leader and then speaker, she co-led the human services budget subcommittee.

"It is an amazing journey from being an advocate to the person who can write the bills and pass the budgets to do these things. We have protected very important safety-net programs for Oregonians," Kotek said. "Certainly we have plenty of things we have to continue to work on. I believe the status quo is not sufficient. I want to make things better."

Among the non-budget bills Kotek says help working families are paid sick leave in 2015, a three-tiered minimum wage in 2016, rent stabilization and paid family and medical leave, both in 2019. The latter program is scheduled to start paying benefits in fall 2023.

House Democrats replaced Dave Hunt with Kotek as their caucus leader the day the 2011 session ended. She became their choice for speaker after the 2012 election, when Democrats gained four seats to take control. Her majorities have ranged from 34 to 38, the latter in 2019 tying the Democratic mark reached in 1975. Democrats currently number 37 — and women from both parties constitute a majority in the entire chamber.

She is the first lesbian in the nation to lead a state legislative chamber.

Problem-solving focus

Despite accusations of partisanship — predictably

from Republicans, sometimes from fellow Democrats — Kotek said her legislative focus has always been on problem-solving.

"If I spend 10 minutes to celebrate the passage of an important bill, my next question is: What's next?" she said. "For me, it's: 'How do we fix it? What do we need to do?' I think people respond to that."

Kotek said the numbers of Democrats do not tell the whole story.

"I may have made it look easy," she said. "But it's a lot of hard work — constant conversations with people, and constant discussions to keep them engaged. It was gratifying that we could get so much done."

Among the legislative achievements during her tenure was the 2019 passage of the Student Success Act, which tied \$1 billion raised annually from a new corporate activity tax to specific improvement programs to boost student performance. Governors and legislatures have sought ways to boost school funding for decades, and particularly after Oregon voters in the 1990s imposed limits on local property taxes and shifted the burden of school operating costs to the state budget. The 2021-23 budget contains a record \$9.3 billion for the state school fund, excluding proceeds from the new tax.

"This Legislature has really stepped up and prioritized public education," Kotek said. "It would have been nice to have done that two years earlier. Then it would have been in place before the pandemic hit," when new staffing for schools has taken a back seat to keeping schools open.

Recent sessions also approved hundreds of millions more in state aid for

housing and homelessness programs during the pandemic. But Kotek said there is more to be done, given that housing is in short supply and rose in cost drastically.

"Resolving the housing crisis is such an integral part of the future of this state, so I will be working on it" if she is elected governor, she said.

Frustrations

If there is one frustration Kotek has encountered as a legislative leader, it is the slow pace of change. Many of the bills she lists as achievements took three to five years to come together.

"Sometimes I wish things could go faster, because people need help. People wonder why things take so long, but it's not for lack of trying," she said.

Even with a mostly supportive governor, Kotek said, bills have to pass the House and the Senate, where majority Democrats also have been split.

"You have to work together as a team to get things done," she said.

One other event will mark Kotek's tenure. On June 10, 2021, the House voted 59-1 to expel Rep. Mike Nearman, a four-term Republican from Polk County, after he was found to have aided anti-lockdown protesters — some of them armed — into a closed Capitol during a Dec. 21, 2020, special session during the pandemic. It was the first expulsion since Oregon became a state in 1859.

"I think it sent a strong message that as a bipartisan group, someone putting people at risk like that was unacceptable," Kotek said. "Once it was clear what Rep. Nearman was doing, there was no question he needed to be expelled. I hope we never have to experience that again."

WHERE WILL MOMENTUM TAKE YOU?



DREAM BIG

2.99% APR*

HOME EQUITY LINE OF CREDIT

Don't keep those home renovations or that dream vacation waiting!

With low introductory rates and our NEW interest-only payment option, our Momentum HELOC allows you to take advantage of your home's equity with low, manageable payments.

Get moving today!
HZCU.ORG/MOMENTUM

*OAC. Introductory rate valid for 6 months from the date the loan is booked. After the first 6 months a variable rate will apply, based on the Wall Street Journal prime rate plus a margin and adjusted quarterly; current rates range from 3.75% - 18.00% APR as of 12/2/21, based on credit worthiness. Maximum APR = 18%. Borrowers may opt for interest-only payments during the initial draw period (10 years). Monthly payments are typically lower with the interest-only payment option; however your principal balance will remain the same until you made additional payments to the principal. After the draw period, the monthly payment will be calculated to repay your loan within the remaining 15 years and may adjust quarterly based on the prime rate.

Equal Housing Opportunity NMLS 407890