

OREGON LEGISLATURE

Democrats dangle \$ 100M for GOP rural districts

Majority Democrats say money has no strings attached

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SALEM — As Oregon lawmakers begin the final two weeks of this year's legislative session, they are about to unveil their approach to a unique puzzle: How to spend more than \$2.5 billion in surging revenue unplanned for when they passed the state budget last year.

The answer involves hundreds of millions for housing, climate change, mental health, job training and other pressing needs. But majority Democrats are also rolling the dice on an eye-popping olive branch: They are going to give minority Republicans \$100 million to spend essentially as they see fit in their rural Oregon districts.

In a move with little precedent, House Speaker Dan Rayfield, D-Corvallis, alerted Republican leaders last week that Democrats were prepared to reserve a notable slice of the state's budgetary bounty for GOP priorities. Part politics and part pragmatism, the offer would give the minority party far more influence over which projects make it through the crucible of the budgeting process.

"I've seen both parties be pretty contentious with one another," said state Rep. Greg Smith, R-Hepner, one of four lawmakers tasked with creating a plan for the money. "I believe the speaker of the House is saying, 'Let's see if there's a better approach to public

policy, one where we can all communicate together.' It's refreshing."

There's also no guarantee the move will salve the fierce partisanship that has ruled in Salem in recent sessions. Smith said his fellow Republicans were at first opposed to the spending proposal, fearing it was a Democratic ploy. The party is still furious that former House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, broke a deal to grant Republicans an equal say on new congressional maps last year.

"Initially, there was a perception that this was some sort of buy off," Smith said of a meeting last week in which House and Senate Republicans discussed the idea. "After initial conversations and once folks had a chance to better understand what this approach was about, I think more folks came along."

In the days since, GOP members and one rural Democrat have whittled down a list of projects most sorely needed in their districts. Smith led that effort with three other lawmakers — Rep. Mark Owens, R-Crane, Rep. David Gomberg, D-Otis, and Senate Minority Leader Tim Knopp, R-Bend.

The package they have arrived at encompasses dozens of projects stretching from Eastern Oregon to the coast. Smith, for instance, said he would request \$1 million to improve each of the seven fairgrounds located in his Northeastern Oregon district. A full list of proposed projects had not been released as of the morning of Feb. 21.

"We're all committed



Lawmakers meet in the Oregon House of Representatives on June 23, 2021, at the Oregon State Capitol in Salem. House Speaker Dan Rayfield, D-Corvallis, alerted Republican leaders in mid-February 2022 that Democrats were prepared to reserve a notable slice of the state's budgetary bounty for GOP priorities. Part politics and part pragmatism, the offer would give the minority party far more influence over which projects make it through the crucible of the budgeting process.

to make sure that rural Oregon has the things it needs to progress," said state Sen. Elizabeth Steiner Hayward, D-Portland, one of the state's top budget writers, when asked about the package Monday. "I'll be honest with you. I think we're making investments that are more than \$100 million."

Though atypical, the approach by Rayfield isn't entirely novel. Flush with federal relief money during last year's session, legislative leaders made the decision — controversial in some circles — to grant each lawmaker millions of dollars to spend in their district as they saw fit.

Lawmakers contacted by OPB all made the case that the new package is a sensible investment to help

small communities that often lack the resources to tackle big-ticket infrastructure projects.

"This was a unique opportunity for members to collaborate in order to bring lasting change to the very heart and soul of our state," Gomberg and Knopp wrote last week in a letter addressed to Rayfield and Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem.

But it's also hard to ignore the possible political implications in a Capitol that has seen bruising battles over the last three years.

Once again this year, Republicans in both chambers are reserving their right to require that bills be read in full before a final vote. That reading requirement is laid out in the state

Constitution, but the parties routinely agreed to waive it in the interest of efficiency until it became a popular bargaining chip for Republicans in 2016.

The House hasn't even attempted a vote to waive the rule this year, meaning each bill is read — either by computer or a clerk — before a vote, eating up precious time in a session that must adjourn by March 7. Republicans have also rarely missed an opportunity to accuse Democrats of overreach that will harm their districts, most often in regard to a bill that would grant overtime pay to farmworkers.

Rayfield's approach to the tactics suggests a potential shift in sparring at the Capitol. House Democrats under Kotek often accused

Republicans of unwarranted obstruction when they forced bill reading. Rayfield, who's been in the job for less than a month, has instead said the strategy is understandable. His party has held off on caustic media releases.

"I don't necessarily see it as being obstructionist," the speaker said in a meeting with reporters earlier this month. "It's their ability to protest."

But Rayfield has also suggested that Democrats will be able to move their agenda within this session's tight time frame regardless of bill reading. The \$100 million allotment for rural projects was presented as a token of good faith, Smith said, rather than a way to purchase GOP cooperation.

"There's absolutely no strings attached," Rayfield said Feb. 21. "This is not an exchange for anything. This is about making meaningful change in communities across this state."

If the spending opportunity is being viewed that way by the House Republican caucus at large, it's not saying. A spokesperson for the caucus, Andrew Fromm, denied in an email that the party was being offered any special influence.

"House Republicans do not have free rein on any spending," he wrote. "The caucus is aware of proposals submitted by multiple legislators from both parties that would benefit rural Oregon districts."

Smith, the House Republican budget lead, said this is an approach unlike any he's seen. He's just not sure it will help heal relationships in Salem.

"I would hope it moves us a step closer," he said, adding: "You're always going to have folks who are skeptical."

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