

Program helps with internet access

Low-income Oregon households eligible for high-speed internet discount through federal program

By MIKE ROGOWAY
The Oregonian

SALEM — A new federal program will subsidize internet connections for low-income households, paying \$30 a month to help people cover the cost of online access.

All three of Oregon's major broadband providers, Comcast, CenturyLink and Zply Fiber, are participating, as are leading wireless internet carriers AT&T and Verizon. Comcast, the state's largest internet provider, estimates that more than 180,000 households are eligible in its service territory in Oregon and Southwest Washington.

The new \$14 billion Affordable Connectivity Program is the successor to the Emergency Broadband Benefit that Congress established during the pandemic.

The older program, which expired Tuesday, drew on temporary funding established by COVID-19 relief programs and paid up to \$50 a month to offset internet costs at a time when millions of people were working and attending school remotely.

Congress authorized the new Affordable Connectivity Program last fall as a long-term successor. It pays \$30 a month, or up to \$75 for households on tribal lands. People qualify if their household income is less than double the federal poverty standard.

That means a single person with an income below \$27,000 a year qualifies; for a family of four, the qualifying standard is \$55,500. People also qualify if they participate in certain federal public assistance programs, among them food stamps, Medicaid and the National School Lunch Program.

The federal government is taking applications online at acpbenefit.org. Eligible applicants have the money applied to their monthly internet bills.

Some families with low incomes can receive free internet service through the new program. Comcast's Internet Essentials program, for example, offers discounted internet service to families that qualify for free and reduced-price school lunches, Medicaid, food stamps and other programs.

People who qualify for Internet Essentials, which offers downloads of up to 50 megabits per second, can have the entire cost of their internet connection paid for by the Affordable Connectivity Program.



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File
A sign marks a home for sale in La Grande on Friday, Nov. 26, 2021. A judge in March 2022 blocked Oregon's law prohibiting buyers from providing "love letters" and personal photographs to sellers as a way to improve their chances of getting the house they want.

Real estate 'love letters'

Prospective homebuyers can again write personal notes to appeal to sellers in Oregon

By APRIL EHRLICH
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — A federal judge on Friday, March 4, granted a preliminary injunction that prohibits Oregon from enforcing a law against "love letters" to home sellers.

In his court order, District Judge Marco A. Hernández says Oregon's House Bill 2550 "likely violates" the First Amendment rights of real estate agents.

"It is not in the public interest to enforce a law that is likely unconstitutional, even one aimed at the laudable goal of reducing unlawful discrimination in housing," his legal opinion reads.

The 2021 law was the first of its kind in the nation. It prohibited buyers from providing "love letters" and personal photographs to sellers as a way to improve their chances of getting the house they want. Supporters argue that these letters perpetuate housing discrimination by revealing a buyer's race, religion, sexual orientation or marital status.

The real estate market has grown uneasy with love letters because they risk raising a housing discrimination claim. Many real estate agents won't accept them. Still, proponents say these letters are often the only edge a first-time buyer has against deep-pocketed investors that buy entry-level homes.

Shortly after the law passed, the conservative Pacific Legal Foundation filed a lawsuit on behalf of the Bend-based Total Real Estate Group. They filed the lawsuit

See, Letters/Page B6

'Bracket creep' increases among Oregonians

Many rising incomes put more Oregon residents in higher tax brackets

By MIKE ROGOWAY
The Oregonian

PORTLAND — Most Oregonians have enjoyed steadily rising incomes dating back to the end of the Great Recession, but it's been an especially lucrative stretch for those at the top end of the income spectrum.

Oregon had about 75,000 taxpayers in the state's top income tax bracket in 2020, according to state data, triple the number in 2010.

State economists call this "bracket creep," the steady rise in the tax rate that people pay as their incomes rise. And it's a driving force behind Oregon's rapidly growing state revenues.

Oregon personal income tax rates range from 4.75% to 9.9%. People pay the top rate on incomes over \$125,000-\$250,000 for couples filing jointly.

While just under 4% of Oregonians pay the state's highest tax rate, they account for more than a third of the personal income taxes Oregon collects. And those rising incomes fill the state's tax coffers to overflowing.

"Not only does that income get taxed, the average tax rate goes up because a lot of our taxpayers now are moving into higher tax brackets. And so they're taxed at a higher rate," state economist Mark McMullen explained to Oregon lawmakers in his quarterly revenue forecast this month.

Not coincidentally, he forecast that Oregonians will likely get yet another kicker rebate in 2024.

Corporate tax payments are up, too, but Oregon's general fund relies primarily on personal income taxes. The general fund receives nine times more from personal income taxes than from taxes on company profits.

Company profits do filter through to personal income taxes, too. A decade of bull market returns on Wall Street prompted people to cash in, selling stocks and other assets — thereby producing more taxable income for themselves.

It's a two-way street, of course. Incomes usually fall when the economy falters. And declines on Wall Street are magnified in Oregon's personal income tax payments, because people are less likely to sell depressed assets. And if they do sell, they sell for less.

"We get very drastic losses when we have a traditional recession," McMullen said, "as taxpayers fall out of this top tax rate."

Potential county hemp restrictions raise concerns about Oregon industry

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SALEM — Oregon counties may suspend new hemp production under a law recently passed by the Legislature, raising concerns in the hemp industry about farmers missing economic opportunities.

Under Senate Bill 1564, which now awaits the signature of Gov. Kate Brown, county governments can declare an emergency to stop the issuance of new state hemp licenses for two years.

Hemp production in Oregon has already fallen precipitously due to an oversupply, but county restrictions could hinder an industry resurgence at a time when new uses for the crop are multiplying, experts say.

"The negative impact is it sends a message to the rest of the country that Oregon is not where you want to do hemp," said Beau Whitney, an economist who tracks the industry. "It puts the state farther and farther behind."

Excitement about the

high demand and healthful effects of cannabidiol, or CBD, caused a surge in hemp production that was soon followed by a surplus, prompting many farmers to abandon or reduce cultivation of the crop.

Acreage across the U.S. dropped by more than 50% last year, while Oregon's acreage plummeted more than 80%, according to Whitney.

At the same time, Oregon law enforcement authorities have complained to state lawmakers that hemp is being used to disguise the illegal production of marijuana, a related cannabis crop with psychoactive properties.

"When you can't regulate an industry, it makes no sense to add more work for our regulatory agencies," testified Nathan Sickler, Jackson County's sheriff, during a legislative hearing last month.

The original language of SB 1564 would have imposed a two-year moratorium on new hemp licenses,



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press, File
Hemp is harvested from an Oregon field in this undated photo. A 2022 bill that permits counties to suspend new hemp production has raised concerns about farmers missing economic opportunities.

but the bill was amended so that the decision was left to counties.

The idea was to provide "local control" since the problem with sham hemp farms was mostly reported in Jackson and Josephine counties.

However, the amount of licensed hemp grown in hoop house systems common for marijuana represents less than 2% of state acreage, Whitney said.

"The data does not sup-

port the narrative at all," he said, referring to licensed hemp growers allegedly producing black market marijuana. "Will this really do any good? Probably not."

Whitney said it is commendable that lawmakers scaled back the bill's scope in response to hemp industry concerns, but he fears the bill still sends the wrong signal.

Hemp is seeing new demand in products that have nothing to do with

CBD, including bioplastics and livestock feed, he said. The crop can even be used as an alternative to lithium in batteries.

Meanwhile, carbon credits — which are sold to offset emissions — are poised to become a new revenue source for hemp farmers, he said.

"This regulatory uncertainty is impacting the fiber and grain side," Whitney said. "It's suppressing the growth and development. At the time Oregon should be supporting hemp on an industrial scale, it's trying to put restrictions on hemp."

Mark Taylor, founder of the Southern Oregon Hemp Cooperative, said the bill could punish growers who wisely decided to stop growing hemp temporarily due to the oversupply or for crop rotation. It also blocks legitimate newcomers with fresh ideas from the industry.

"They're penalizing us for their lack of pre-planning," Taylor said of state lawmakers. "You restrict

brainpower that could come in and do it better."

Oregon hemp farmers have drastically scaled back planting in response to market conditions, which isn't recognized by lawmakers who don't understand the industry, Taylor said.

"The market self-adjusted and they gave no due to that whatsoever," he said.

The state government would have been more effective with outreach and education to the hemp industry and other farmers, warning them to keep an eye out for bad actors who'd attempt illicit marijuana production, Taylor said.

"I don't think government spends enough time on the ground," he said. "They're in their ivory tower."

County restrictions would diminish the industry's competitive spirit and amount to the government "picking winners and losers" by allowing existing growers to keep their licenses, Taylor said. "It all speaks of government overreach."