

Special legislative session gavels to a close

No major union-related bills are heard during the three-week experiment

SALEM — The Oregon Legislature's first-ever experiment with an annual session wrapped up Feb. 22. No major union-related bills were debated during the three-week session, but labor organizations took sides in favor of a handful of bills. And not many of those passed, despite Democratic leadership of the Oregon House, Oregon Senate and governor's office.

The top priority of the Oregon AFL-CIO was a package of mortgage reforms supported by a consumer coalition that included AARP, OSP-PIRG, and the union-backed group Our Oregon. State Senator Ben Westlund (D-Tupelo) led the campaign, introducing a bill that contained six proposals to protect borrowers from onerous mortgage lending practices. But the mortgage industry mounted fierce opposition, and four of the six were amended out of the bill.

On the House side, Speaker Jeff Merkely (D-Portland) backed the stripped-down bill, and managed to get it passed by a single vote. Three Democratic House members voted against the bill — Larry Galizio of Tigard, Deborah Boone of Cannon Beach, and Mike Schaufler of Happy Valley. But Merkely was also able to get three Republicans to vote for it —

John Lim of R-Gresham, Donna Nelson of McMinnville, and Bill Garrard of Klamath Falls. In the end, it didn't matter: Senate leaders Peter Courtney (D-Salem) and Richard Devlin (D-Tualatin) refused to give the bill a vote, saying it wouldn't pass, even though Democrats controlled 18 of 30 seats in the Senate.

"The industry was lobbying from day one to stop any lending reform from moving forward," said Angela Martin, Economic Fairness Coalition Director for Our Oregon.

The mortgage reform proposals will likely be back for debate next year, when the next Legislature meets in January.

"We will see more pain in the mortgage lending arena for homeowners," Martin said. "The banking community has gone way overboard with excessive fees and abusive contract terms, and it's eating into the pockets of too many working families."

Two mortgage reform bills did pass, however — bills that were supported by a gubernatorial task force heavy with mortgage industry representatives. One will limit "rescue mortgage" scams that prey on borrowers in foreclosure; the other will require mortgage bankers and brokers

to file an annual report about their activities.

Supporters of a union-backed third party, the Oregon Working Families Party (OWFP), were disappointed again when their proposal to restore "fusion" voting failed. Fusion, which exists in several other states, allows candidates to be listed on ballots as the nominee of more than one political party. OWFP has ballot status as a minor party in Oregon, but hasn't yet run candidates for fear of the "spoiler" effect, in which voting for a third-party candidate helps elect the less appealing major party candidate. Instead OWFP has focused on restoring fusion, which Oregon once had. Passing fusion would breathe life into a party like OWFP, enabling workers to vote on the ballot line of a party that sticks to bread-and-butter economic issues and avoids divisive social issues.

Last year, OWFP tried and failed to win passage of a fusion bill in the Legislature's regular session. In February, OWFP went to work again on state lawmakers with the help of a paid organizer and two contract lobbyists. They managed to get commitments of support from a majority in each chamber, said party co-chair Barbara Dudley — including numer-

ous Republicans, who believe fusion would lessen the spoiler effect of conservative third parties like the Libertarians. But the bill died in the Ways and Means Committee, because Senate Democratic leaders, including Senate President Peter Courtney, refused to give the bill a vote. Dudley credits three Democratic lawmakers in particular as having fought for the bill: state senators Brad Avakian and Ben Westlund, and state representative Chip Shields. OWFP leaders plan to meet soon to consider options, which include a ballot initiative for 2008 or 2010, another try at the Legislature in 2009, and a third, unnamed option.

On the issue of health care, several union groups backed a proposal for additional money to expand the rolls of poor children on the Oregon Health Plan. Right now the kids are dropped from the rolls if they don't reapply every six months; the bill would have given them at least a year's worth of health coverage once they qualify. But a scaled-back state budget forecast drove a nail into the coffin of that idea, said AFL-CIO president Tom Chamberlain.

Behind the scenes, there was also talk of adding a representative of or-

ganized labor to the governor-appointed Global Warming Commission. But that went nowhere.

A bright spot for labor was a bill to require energy conservation improvements in state buildings, sponsored by Brad Witt (D-Clatskanie), former secretary-treasurer of the Oregon AFL-CIO and a union rep for United Food and Commercial Workers Local 555. Witt sponsored a similar bill last year, which failed to pass. This time, an amended version passed with a unanimous vote in the Oregon House, and all but one vote in the Oregon Senate. The bill could result in thousands of jobs for union building trades workers.

Witt also was able to get \$500,000 appropriated to a revolving loan fund for reconstruction efforts in communities like Vernonia that were hit hard by last year's severe storms.

AFSCME, one of the larger public employee unions, helped pass a bill aimed at heading off a major budget threat. Lawmakers voted to refer to voters a bill to provide drug treatment and longer prison sentences for repeat offenders committing property crimes. The legislature's proposal is put forth as an alternative to a much more expensive ballot measure authored by Kevin Mannix that would require mandatory minimum sentences for property crimes and identity theft, even for first time offenders whose crimes were committed to feed drug habits. The way the referral is written, if voters approve it, it will invalidate the Mannix measure.

Alltold, AFL-CIO President Chamberlain termed it a successful legislative session, which passed consensus bills and ended short and under budget.

"Could they have done more? Of course they could have," Chamberlain said. "We didn't bring forward groundbreaking legislation because we didn't have time to build support for that."

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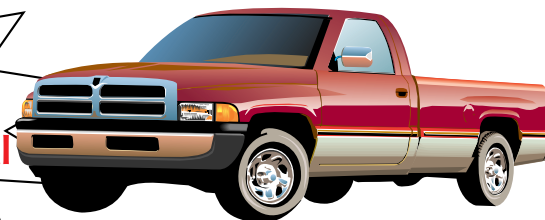
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