

Oregon Legislative Wrap Up

By State Senator Betsy Johnson



There was a carefree moment before the start of the 2016 legislative session when Newfoundland dogs bounded into the state capitol, their owners lobbying to make the breed Oregon's official state dog.

They didn't succeed, and it's just as well. This session devolved into a cat fight.

Immediately after the session ended, it was as if peace and prosperity now reigned over Oregon, what with a new minimum wage and bills promoting "affordable" housing and "clean energy."

Many Oregonians are not fooled. They understand we have real problems, and we need real solutions – not symbolic gestures.

For example, the minimum

wage. It turns out that the state's seven public universities have penciled out how much the increase in the minimum wage will cost them. The schools employ thousands of student workers, who will now earn millions more as the multiple tiers of the pay increase kick in over the next six years.

How will the schools pay for this? New revenues. In other words, tuition increases. Small businesses won't have that option to meet the demands of the new wages. What will they do? Pass along the costs to their customers?

I voted against the minimum-wage increase for this very reason. So many of these ideas that sound good in a legislative bill later mutate and take on new lives when they become law. The same people keep getting hurt, in this case working- and middle-class people.

Instead of minimum wage, I continued to push for family-wage jobs.

In particular, an Advanced Manufacturing Research Center (AMRC) in Columbia County.

Modeled after a very successful project developed by Boeing and the University of Sheffield in England, the Oregon AMRC would provide training for students through industry-sponsored apprenticeships.

On my own time and expense, I visited the facility in Sheffield. To see what the center looks like, go to <http://www.amrc.co.uk/>. These are opportunities to learn skills leading to jobs in research, design and manufacturing for businesses of all sizes, from aerospace giants to local small and medium-sized enterprises. These are life-time careers for Oregonians who want a future, not minimum wage.

Boeing would like to emulate the Sheffield model in Oregon through a partnership with Portland Community College and an array of stakeholders that government can help bring together, including: Oregon State University, the Oregon Institute of Technology, the Oregon Employment Department, Portland State University, the Oregon State Building and Construction Trades Council, the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers 48.

The legislature agreed to spend \$7.5 million to help start the project. This was my highest priority for the 2016 session. This is how politics can help create meaningful economic change. Unfortunately, too much of what came out of the 2016 legislative session may prove disappointing to the people who are supposed to be helped. Look at the "landmark" housing bills. What will these really mean to someone trying to buy or rent a place? One bill will allow cities to use inclusionary zoning to require developers to include "affordable" apartments in projects of at least 20 units. Developers may stick to building smaller apartment projects to avoid the requirements.

The definition of "affordable" can be slippery. How affordable will these rents actually be? Who will make up the difference? Probably other tenants paying an even higher market rate.

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Another housing bill restricts landlords from raising rents for a tenant's first year and requires a 90-day notice of rent increases. While this will give renters more time to look for housing, it does nothing to increase the number of available units.

The way to lower housing costs is to increase the amount of housing available so it isn't overwhelmingly a seller's or landlord's market. Planners should have seen this coming at least a decade ago. A failure to acknowledge mistakes and learn from them increases the likelihood of more mistakes.

Another bill hailed as "pioneering" will require Oregon to phase out coal-generated electricity and increase reliance on wind and solar resources. Sold as "clean energy," it will increase costs to consumers but do little to reduce carbon emissions.

One of the strangest aspects of this bill is that while wind and solar are used in the calculations for what is considered renewable energy, hydropower was excluded. Why would environmentalists denounce coal, but also oppose hydropower as a renewable – given its natural fit with Oregon's weather. Is there less money to be made off of rain?

As we saw in the unraveling career of former Gov. John Kitzhaber and his first lady, there is money to be made off of environmental causes. It was of particular concern to me that the Oregon Public Utility Commission was silenced in its investigation of this anti-coal bill with its anti-hydro provisions. As e-mails later released to the media revealed, the commission was told to hold off on public criticism.

This act of political intimidation succeeded – for now. It helps to remember, though, that the Oregon Legislature is part of the larger political world. There may be a warning for us in what is happening in the presidential race. Republican and Democratic party pundits have been reminded who really calls the shots - Voters.

Admire them or not, Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump are forcing Democrats and Republicans to acknowledge that the same old political machinations don't work anymore.

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