

Salem Report

By Representative Brad Witt



As we enter the last month of the 2019 Legislative session, things are moving quickly, and many bills are moving through both chambers. Recently the Oregon House approved SB 1049, the PERS reform bill. As a state we have seen the PERS unfunded liability balloon since the recession. Employer contribution rates have more than doubled in the last decade, forcing government employers to lay off staff and make program reductions. Even in the best of times the increase in required contributions to pay down the \$27 billion unfunded liability has led public employers to make painful cuts. For school districts this has meant laying off teachers and cutting school days and other critical services.

I voted in favor of SB 1049 because I believe it will help accomplish two important things. First, the bill includes system-wide cost savings that will protect critical services and ensure long-term stability in our retirement system. Secondly, it will head off efforts to make even deeper cuts to public employee benefits.

The bill is the result of years of legislative and actuarial analysis to determine the best ways to reduce the costs of PERS. These changes will reduce costs for public employers in a way that is legally permissible, actuarially sound, equitable, and system-wide.

Thanks to the advocacy of public employees, this proposal was made stronger, eliminating cuts to the Money Match and ensuring there were both one-time and ongoing resources dedicated to paying down the unfunded liability.

One of those ongoing, new PERS revenue resources will be the net proceeds from Oregon Lottery Sports Betting. This was a concept I introduced in HB 2288 this session, and it was adopted in full form as part of SB 1049. The Oregon Lottery plans to legalize sports betting before the 2019 NFL season starts and the program is estimated to contribute tens of millions of dollars each year to reduce the cost of the PERS program. I am proud to have found a means by which serious reductions in PERS costs will be realized without further burdening our employers or public employees.

For too many years, Oregon lawmakers have been unable to come up with a PERS reform solution, and I

believe inaction this session would have caused a much worse result for public employees and ultimately for communities across the state. Individuals and organizations are making very real threats to put PERS reform on the ballot. One threatened ballot measure would create yet another retirement tier, denying future employees access to a pension entirely, and instead create a system where their retirement comes entirely in the form of a "defined-contribution" or 401K-style program. If such a ballot measure were to pass, it would mean disastrous impacts on PERS, and public employees.

Ultimately, I believe there will be long-term benefits for our entire state with this legislation, and I remain as committed as ever to ensuring our public employees are compensated in a way which they deserve.

The Oregon Department of Transportation held a Community Open House June 18 in Rainier to discuss the East A Street Rail Improvement project. This project has been designed to enhance safety along the City of Rainier's main street where the rail line operates closely to vehicle traffic, pedestrians, and bikes.

The project will create one-way roads on either side of the track, eliminating the asphalt road surface over the track and exposing the railroad ties and aggregate base, called "day-lighting" the track. Safety improvements will physically separate vehicles and pedestrians/bikes from the tracks and improve rail crossing with new gates.

At the same time, the City of Rainier will be upgrading and relocating the City's utilities, adding off-street parking, and improving freight movements to Hwy 30.

We are continuing to get feedback on the Personal Tax Kicker. Nearly 300 people have now contacted my office or weighed in on social media about this issue. The majority of respondents agree with my position which is that until there is a public vote to change the kicker law, the kicker in its entirety should be returned to the taxpayers. Thank you all for weighing in on this issue.

This session we have taken up several bills relating to prescription drugs, in an effort to bring prices down, and to help visually impaired individuals get a better understanding about their medication.

• HB 2658 Requires 60 days advance notice before raising the price of a drug. Advance notice would give insurance companies time to switch to a more affordable drug, putting pressure on drug companies to keep their prices down. This bill was unanimously approved in the Senate, and I joined with the majority in the House to approve this bill.

• HB 2935 Requires pharmacies to provide a prescription reader for a person who is visually impaired upon request. For consumers to safely and effectively manage their medication it is critical they understand the types of medications, recommended doses, duration, and side effects. Prescription drugs come with labels and written information and instructions but reading and understanding those can be difficult for the visually impaired. HB 2935 was approved in the Senate and in the House.

• HB 2689 Would allow prescription drugs to be imported from Canada. Prescription drugs sold in Canada are much less expensive, typically 30% to 50% cheaper, but sometimes as much as 80% lower. While opponents have raised safety concerns, Canadian standards are on par with those of the United States. Vermont and Florida already import prescription medications from Canada and have had no drug quality issues. Whether this legislation will be successful this session is unknown, although HB 2689 received a do-pass recommendation in the House Health Care Committee, it is now in Ways and Means. In order to implement HB 2689, the Oregon Health Authority would need to design and implement a wholesale prescription drug program, which would require funding of about \$1 million per biennium.

Recently I was honored to be named a Habitat for Humanity Oregon Legislative Champion. The recognition comes in part for my advocacy of HB 2285 which cleared up receivership issues on derelict and abandoned homes, opening up the opportunity to transform these so-called "zombie" houses into neighborhood-enhancing, safe and healthy affordable homes. Habitat for Humanity of Oregon announced the launch of a national advocacy campaign, aimed at improving home affordability for 10 million people in the U.S. over the next five years.

Housing issues, specifically the lack of affordable housing, has been a focus this legislative session, and HB

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reflecting the spirit of our community

Publisher and Managing Editor
Scott Laird
503-367-0098
scott@vernoniasvoice.com

Contributors

Jamie Adams
Larry Boxman
Chip Bubl
Tobie Finzel
Jerry Keenon
Florence Lennox
Senator Jeff Merkley
Karen Miller
Shannon Romtvedt
Captain Will Steinweg
Representative Brad Witt

Photography

Scott Laird

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Vernonia's Voice, LLC
PO Box 55
Vernonia, OR 97064
503-367-0098

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2001 takes up this issue, with a proposal to increase infill in established neighborhoods. HB 2001 would require cities with populations of 10,000 and less than 25,000 to permit the development of a duplex on each lot in residential-zoned areas that allow for detached single-family homes. For cities with a population greater or equal to 25,000 and each county with a metropolitan service district, HB 2001 would require the permit of all middle housing types in these same residential-zoned areas. The term "middle housing" refers to duplexes, triplexes, quadplexes, cottage clusters, and townhouses.

Oregon currently lacks more than 155,000 homes, mostly for middle- and lower-income Oregonians. Every

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