

Public safety comes to Salem

Rep. Jennifer Williamson talks about new public safety initiatives and the potential for real reform

BY JOANNE ZUHL
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In the past 10 years, Oregon's prison population has grown by nearly 50 percent, and while it remains lower than that national average, it has grown four times faster than that average since 2000.

According to a recent report by the Pew Center on the States, Oregon offenders are staying in prison longer today, even though their offenses are less serious than those from 2000, thanks in large part to so-called tough-on-crime initiatives such as Measures 11 and 57. Budgets are swelling, (See more on this from the Partnership for Safety and Justice on page 12) and the governor's office projects a costly \$600 million road ahead if these trends continue. Which has lawmakers scrambling for the brakes.

Among the most fervent of them is Rep. Jennifer Williamson, D-Portland, the co-chair of the Housing Ways and Means Public Safety Subcommittee. The subcommittee is currently reviewing HB 3194, the Legislature's rollout policy to revamp the state's public safety practices, with 19 proposals from sentencing reform to rehabilitation practices. But this is not just about the state's policies around corrections. The bill could have widespread implications for how we address community-oriented corrections, mental health, drug and alcohol addiction and reconnecting felons with society.

In a recent conversation with Williamson, it's clear that if all goes her way, this is the year she thinks the legislature will finally get it right.

Joanne Zuhl: *Are these new approaches? Is there really a new attitude here?*

Jennifer Williamson: This is a watershed legislative session for public safety because what we know is that those policy packages are data-driven; the best responses in public safety that we've seen in other states, that we've seen in pilot projects. We know that stuff in that bill works. So it's not new in that sense, but it's a shift in attitude around where we put our resources in public safety. And what I really think is exciting about this is we would have the ability to create a different kind of infrastructure in public safety. One that emphasizes community corrections, parole and probation, different ways of supervising offenders so that it's not a one-size-fits-all. We know that a one-size fits all approach to public safety doesn't work. And that's what Measure 11 is.

J.Z.: *You're no fan of Measure 11. Is this an anti-Measure 11 legislation?*

J.W.: I know my colleagues are worried that it's an anti-Measure 11 legislation, but

it's actually not. It doesn't have a huge impact on M11, but one of the recommendations in there is to take out second-degree crimes, to allow some judicial discretion. What it does is recognize that Measure 11 is appropriate for certain first-degree crimes, but when you're talking about an Assault II, there is such a wide range of what that could be. A mandatory minimum is inappropriate in that case, and that the judge should be able to look at the situation and craft an appropriate sentence. It builds back in some discretion in places we've seen the most egregious one-size-fits-all approach under Measure 11.

J.Z.: *You've also said you think the public safety legislation has been misrepresented.*

J.W.: It's that kind of attitude that if we do this, that means we're soft on crime. So that's the other piece of this. It's anything but being soft on crime. If you look at the data, our communities are actually safer when we employ these policies than if we put everybody in the Department of Corrections for long sentences.

I think leaving the system the way it is, quote unquote, "a soft-on-crime approach," because we know we can keep our communities safer if we do the things that are proposed by the bill.

J.Z.: *You've argued that Measure 11 hasn't made us safer. Why do you think that?*

J.W.: Right. We know a lot more on what drives criminology. We deal with addiction — if you think about just the brain science developed since Measure 11 was passed. There may have been some good outcomes to Measure 11 around standardizing sentencing, but we know so much more around how one size doesn't fit all. It would be unconscionable in any other profession to not revisit our practices on a continual basis to make sure we're doing the best thing with the best science. We need to be willing to do that in public safety. As policy makers, we need to be doing that, and we're not doing that right now with Measure 11. This is an attempt to do that.

J.Z.: *Property and violent crime statistics are going down in your district, and across the city. However, the police say their resources are still being consumed by dealing with mental health and related issues.*

J.W.: When I was at the downtown neighborhood association, I asked a police

officer, of these proposals, what do you think would make our community safer? And he said mental health funding. Those are the calls I'm going on. And having a place to take people that's not jail is what we need in this community and recognize that our police are dealing with a mental health crisis.

J.Z.: *Do we have funding?*

J.W.: The president of this Senate, Peter Courtney, as said we are going to fund mental health in a way that we haven't done before in Oregon. He's committed to that. So if the Senate president is committed to investing in mental health, then it will be invested in. There's lots of recognition in the Capitol that mental health needs to be dealt with in a different way. It needs to be funded at levels higher than in the past.

J.Z.: *Do you have any concerns about the state addressing mental health in the arena of public safety rather than the arena of health care?*

J.W.: I think you're hitting the nail on the head. We're dealing with a health care problem, a health issue in a corrections setting, and that's just fundamentally inappropriate. And that's what's so heartbreaking about the way we deal with the construct of crimes in our community. That we are forcing a square peg into a round hole, and we're forcing health care issues into a system that is ill equipped to deal with them. So I don't see how building a mental health wing in the prison is a great way necessarily to deal with mental health issues. To some extent it's appropriate, but is that the best way to be dealing with this issue? I don't think it is.

We've gathered really great data; we've brought in experts from across the nation. This is not something that has been slapped together.

J.Z.: *Looking at where we are now. We have thousands of people with felonies on their records walking out of prison every year. They face closed doors at every turn, including employment and housing opportunities. What is being done to help people with felonies reenter society, get jobs and housing?*

J.W.: Fundamental transition services: That's one of the things this commission focused on: What do we do with transition? We don't do a good

job with that and we don't invest in that. So people come out and we're not doing what we need to do to make sure that they can have gainful and meaningful employment and housing and reconnecting in their community. So that's one piece of the work that we're doing. But if you're talking about the folks who are already out in our community, one of the things that has been happening is an analysis of our expungement statutes. They're a mess. They've been cobbled together over the years. So year after year we find a problem and we do a Band-Aid fix on expungement. We're looking at how we can better help people get their records expunged.

The other thing we're looking at is can we revamp the sex offender registry. Which people's hair catches on fire anytime somebody uses the word sex offender. It's a very sensitive topic and people don't even understand who is on it or why they're on it, or what kind of crimes will land you on the sex offender registry. And if you think a felony is bad, getting on the sex offender registry is really bad when it comes to the ability to get shelter and a job. I think the good news is we've recognized that we're falling down when helping transition people.

And then there's just things like how people get their drivers licenses once they get out. Little things that make a huge difference. If you come out with no identification from the Department of Corrections, how do you do anything? The Governor's committee on transition is looking at those issues: How do we remove these little barriers that become a big deal.

J.Z.: *The flip side is society: Encouraging businesses to hire people with felonies or landlords to lease to them.*

J.W.: It's 100 percent a part of it — and our attitudes around redemption. With the DEOC at the federal level, you can't ask whether someone has a felony on the first application. You can ask further down the line if it's appropriate to the job, but I haven't heard that the practice has changed on the front line. It's one of those things that are a barrier for a lot of folks.

J.Z.: *Your district encompasses the Drug Impact Areas — specific geographic boundaries that place added punitive measures on people*

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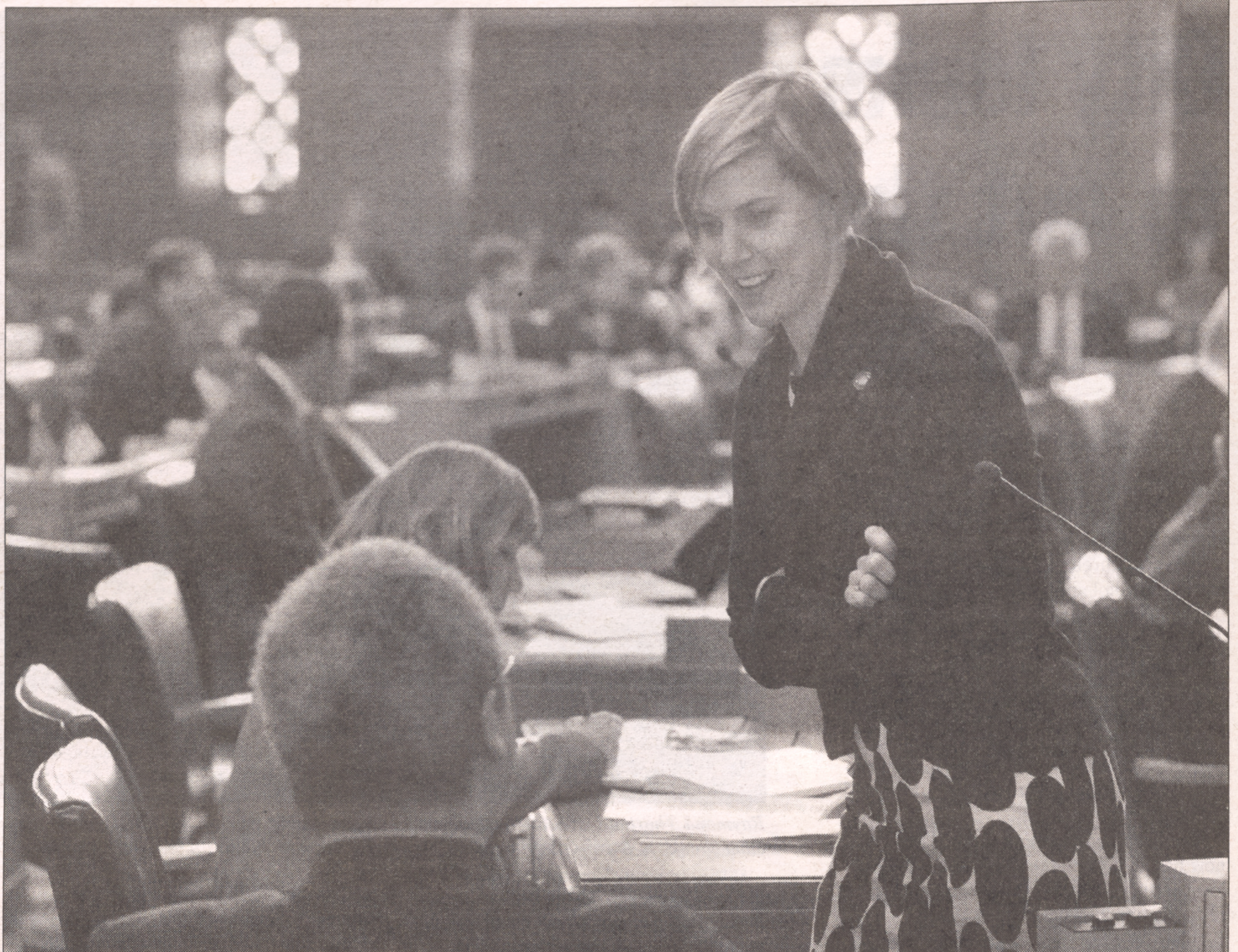


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