

Poverty issues to mostly take a back seat in Salem

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When legislators convene in Salem for the Legislature's month-long session, scheduled to begin Feb. 3, they are likely to focus on economic development, job growth, continuing to fund and reform education, and pass legislation that didn't quite make it during the 2013 session.

The short, month-long session allows lawmakers to adjust the state's budget and make any necessary tweaks to legislation. Because of the session's brevity, it's difficult to pursue new or complex legislation.

House Speaker Tina Kotek (D-Portland) says the funds lawmakers will have at its disposal to spend will be limited, meaning the Legislature will be making funding decisions based upon how effectively the money can be spent.

"You don't have time for a huge, wide variety of conversations," says Jim Moore, a Pacific University political science professor. "They're so short, legislators need to have active plans and winding up votes by now."

Each legislative committee will sponsor five bills, and legislators are allowed to introduce two "priority bills." Legislators are expected to revisit the small business tax cuts approved during the special session in October, and also decide how to spend \$26 million generated from scaling back a senior medical deduction.

Affordable housing, social justice, poverty and the safety net are not expected to be big topics. While Oregon continues to rank high among other states in hunger, homelessness and unemployment, Moore and others think the sense that the economy is improving and the recession ending will dampen arguments to increase funding for social safety net programs.

But legislators may consider coming to the aid of Oregonians whose long-term unemployment came to an end last week when Congress did not authorize new funding. "They can absolutely do that," Moore says. "Whether they're willing to or not is another issue."

Kotek, who has championed affordable housing and poverty issues as a legislator, says the level of funding the programs will receive is uncertain. "We will be making tough decisions between a number of very important programs," she says. "At this point, it's difficult to make any promises about that kind of funding request."

The Housing Alliance, a statewide membership organization advocating for increased resources for affordable housing and poverty programs, plans to lobby the Legislature on two funding appropriations and one bill that would add funding or bolster programs that prevent or end homelessness and increase affordable housing.

The first would add three million dollars to the Emergency Housing Account and one million dollars to the State Homeless Assistance Program — an amount, says Alison McIntosh, deputy director of Neighborhood Partnerships, the advocacy

organization overseeing the Housing Alliance's work, that could help approximately 1,200 families who are either homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

Both programs allow money to be spent flexibly, and pay for short-term rent assistance and other programs designed to prevent homelessness or end short-term homelessness. "The great thing about the Emergency Housing Account and the State Homeless Assistance Program is designed to meet people's needs," McIntosh says.

The Housing Alliance advocated for that amount of money to be added to the Emergency Housing Account and the State Homeless Assistance Program during the 2013 session, but the Legislature didn't allocate the money. The funding would return the budgets of both programs to their pre-recession levels.

The second focus of housing advocates is increasing funding for the state's new foreclosure mediation program, which allows homeowners to work with banks to avoid foreclosure. Any additional money could provide more funding for counseling, legal support and outreach to homeowners.

Third, housing advocates will throw their support behind legislation that would require owners of manufactured home parks to notify tenants that they plan to sell the park, and give tenants the time and opportunity to create a reasonable offer to purchase the park themselves. A bill creating this provision died in the 2013 session, but has been the focus of a bipartisan workgroup since then, meaning it's likely to pass.

In general, McIntosh thinks, legislators are becoming more attuned to housing issues. "Having a House committee dedicated to housing has increased the focus significantly," McIntosh says. "I think people are beginning to understand how critical housing is to helping people be healthy, and kids be successful in school."

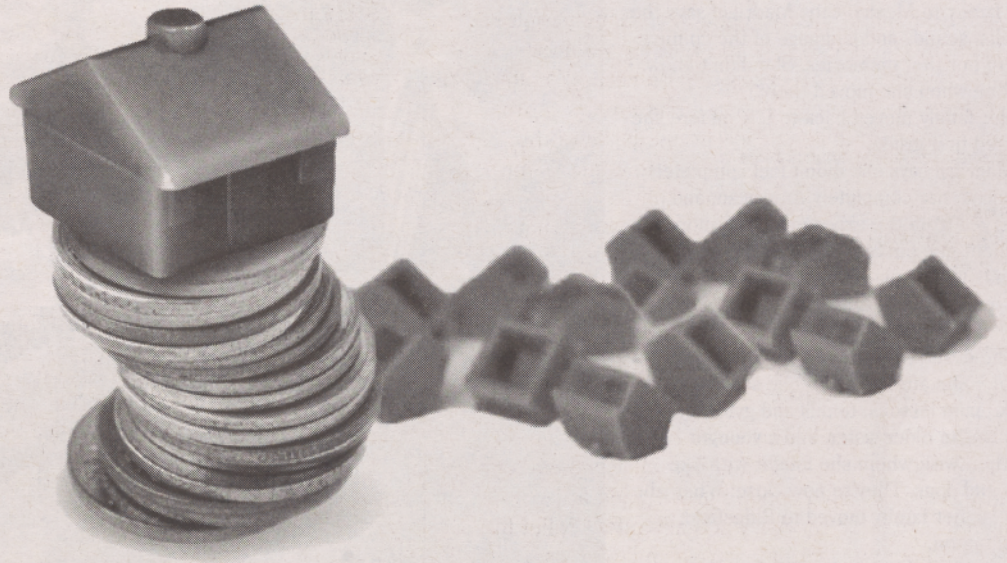
Many of the bills legislators will consider were originally introduced during the 2013 session, but did not pass in the final weeks of the Legislature, partially because Senator Betsy Johnson (D-Scappoose) was in a car accident during the session and was absent from the Senate for a couple weeks, causing the Senate to be evenly tied between democrats and republicans.

"People are going to come in with a whole boatload of things that didn't quite make it in the regular session," Moore says.

One piece of re-introduced legislation, sponsored by Senator Mike Dembrow (D-Portland), would create a state Public Guardian and Conservator program within the state's Office of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman. The program would allow Oregonians with developmental disabilities,

inability to enroll individuals into health insurance through its website. But it's unclear what action, if any, the Legislature may take to help Cover Oregon through its troubles.

There is also likely to be talk about the Columbia River Crossing, which the Legislature voted to fund last year. But when the Washington Legislature did not



dementia, mental illness or injuries who are unable to make decisions about their care or finances to have a guardian make those decisions on their behalf.

The legislation, expected to pass, is one program that would be funded by money generated from the senior medical deduction. Other senior programs, such as Oregon Project Independence, are expected to get additional funding with the money as well. "Senior advocates and agency staff are still putting together details on how we can get the best results with [that] money," Kotek says.

Other 2013 legislation most likely to be reintroduced will cover topics like public lands, banning toxic substances from toys, clean fuel standards, and marijuana legalization. A series of gun control bills that did not pass the Legislature last year are unlikely to be reintroduced again, since the window of opportunity—last year's shootings in Newtown, Conn. and the Clackamas Town Center—has closed.

Health care has taken up a lot of oxygen in the Legislature, since the body completely overhauled the Oregon Health Plan and created a health insurance exchange during the 2011 session. The Senate and House health committees will likely hear informational updates on the progress and work of the Oregon Health Plan's coordinated care organizations, as well as how Cover Oregon—the state's health insurance exchange—is recovering from its

provide its own funding, it seemed as if the project would be scrapped. Governor John Kitzhaber and House Speaker Tina Kotek, both democrats, have publicly stated numerous times they will pursue a way to fund the bridge's construction using only Oregon and federal funds. But the bridge continues to be controversial, and neither the Governor's office nor any legislators have publicly presented a plan to pay for its construction.

Another topic that will almost certainly be an elephant in the room is tax reform. Kitzhaber is vocal about his desire overhaul the state's tax code and even creating a sales tax—something that is anathema to Oregonians, but increasingly recognized as a way to avoid sharp dips in state revenue when the economy sours. There is not enough time in the February session to pass tax reform legislation, but any informational sessions and legislators reactions could indicate what the discussion might look like during the 2015 session.

While advocates, lobbyists and political commentators expect a mellow session, the fact that 2014 is an election year could affect the dynamics and legislator's actions, especially if they are seeking re-election in a tough district or another office. It reflects something seasoned lobbyists learned long ago — you never know what might happen once the Oregon Legislature gets going.

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