

Special Session and Quality Services

As part of our New Strength and Unity Plan, SEIU Local 503, OPEU is working to improve health security and support quality public services.



A view from the gallery during a special legislative session in February.

The first step in the fight for quality public services must be the fight to stop backsliding in the special session because of the revenue shortfall. The revenue picture is bleak because of ballot measures 5 and 47/50. There is a shortfall today and there is a shortfall in the next biennium that will affect state and local government and K-12 schools and community colleges.

Budget shortfalls notwithstanding, the public has indicated that it wants quality public services. Recent polling shows that the public would be willing to raise taxes to support services. For example, 87% of the respondents would support new revenue for services that allow low-income seniors and the disabled to remain independent. New revenue for temporary assistance to families and food stamps for working families are supported by 86% of the respondents. The Oregon Health Plan should be supported with new revenue if necessary, say 82% of the respondents. 82% would support new revenue for child abuse and prevention programs and other health care and assistance for working poor. Services that treat the mentally ill and keep them in a secure residential setting should get new revenue say, 81% of respondents.

The poll also shows that 80% of the public (with only 15% disagreeing) believe it is important to preserve a safety net for people hit hard by layoffs and recession. Whatever problems there are with government services, they are not caused by those who actually deliver the service (78%-20%); it's "bureaucracy." An astonishing 63% (with 32% opposed) believe the kicker is a silly budget practice and that the money should be used to fill the shortfall. A similar margin (61%-34%) believe that Measure 88 allows the

wealthy to deduct more money paid in federal taxes from state taxes, should be delayed to prevent further cuts.

The special session is part of a larger fight to turn the tide toward more support for some, if not all, public services. It is a debate that will have ramifications for many months. The Oregon State Legislature was in its second special session as *The Oregon Public Employee* was headed for presstime.

Attempts to close a \$845 million gap in the state's \$12.3 billion budget in the first special session which ended February 11 were unsuccessful when the Governor vetoed the lawmakers' product because he believed the cuts they made were too deep and the one-time, stopgap revenue measures they proposed were shortsighted and simply created a bigger problem for the next biennium and Legislature.

The Governor attempted to expose the value of public services offered by state and local governments and k-12 school districts with two days of public hearings on February 14 and 15. He was joined for most of the two long days by Senate President Gene Derfler and House Speaker Mark Simmons. A few other legislators joined the hearings for briefer periods of time.

During the week of February 18, the state economist announced that tax collections continue to fall — leaving a \$930 million shortfall.

An increase in the tobacco tax is one of the ways lawmakers are considering to raise the money to close at least a portion of the budget hole. While it is not the only method of raising revenue being considered, it is one with some support within the Legislature and it raises about \$106 million. While many view it, with some justification, as a tax on lower income Oregonians, it also has the effect of lowering health costs by reducing smoking while it provides income for needed human services. Corporate tax reform and delaying the implementation of Measure 88 (mentioned above) are some others.

As of March 1, it was still uncertain how or when the second special session would come to a close.

Several ballot measures of critical importance to SEIU Local 503, OPEU members are racing to collect signatures before the July 5 deadline.

2002 could be another year with a long list of measures on the November General Election ballot.

SEIU Local 503, OPEU has joined with others who are part of the Voter Education Project (see page 25) to reduce — if not

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eliminate — many of the abuses associated with initiative petition signature gathering by requiring that payment by signature be prohibited. Paying signature gatherers by the hour would not be prohibited and such a system is less open to abuse. The bounty now on signatures rewards the gatherer for collecting as many names as possible. That has led to forged signatures and petitions full of signatures that were not properly witnessed, along with other abuses. This election cycle, the Voter Education Project has already documented fraud and abuse of the system and provided evidence to the Attorney General's office. There have been arrests and indictments of several gatherers. We believe Bill Sizemore gets most of his signatures by pay-by-signature.

Once again, Bill Sizemore has two measures that, while targeted at public employees, should be of critical importance to all Oregonians.

One, opposed by SEIU Local 503, OPEU and others, would, as with other similar ballot measure initiatives in past election years, reduce drastically our ability to deliver a message to the public about quality public services and the work we do. Public employees and those who support public education, quality public services, PERS retirement, union rights, wages and benefits for the skills and experience we bring to our jobs, would have a harder time raising money necessary for effective political campaigns.

Employees now have the deduction of their dues and other worthy causes, without the hassle of renewing it each year.

Sizemore's other measure would limit income taxes, crushing government's ability to meet the needs of the people. As Ballot Measure 5 in 1990 impacted local govern-

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