

Gov. Brown details ethics reforms

By HILLARY BORRUD
Capital Bureau

“Another essential element is trust, and rebuilding that trust begins now. These reforms are designed to ensure the timely fulfillment of public records requests, to hold public officials accountable, and foster a culture of transparency.”

The Oregon Government Ethics Commission was also investigating Kitzhaber and former first lady Sylvia Hayes’ actions, although both state investigations were placed on hold until the federal inquiry is complete. Brown’s proposal would end the current requirement in state law that the commission put its inquiry on hold during any criminal investigation. The bill would also require some members of the ethics commission to be appointed by statewide elected officials other than the governor. Currently, the governor directly appoints three members of the ethics commission, and four are selected by the party caucuses in the Legislature.

Brown also wants the first spouse or governor’s partner and all other advisers to the governor to file disclosures of any potential conflicts of interest. Hayes never filed the financial disclosures, despite serving as an unpaid adviser to Kitzhaber on economic de-

SALEM — Gov. Kate Brown announced details Wednesday of the ethics and transparency reforms she pledged to push for when she took office last month.

Brown’s proposal includes bills to increase the fine for egregious cases of public officials knowingly using their positions for personal gain, and to reduce the governor’s power over the state ethics commission. A third bill will require the Secretary of State’s Office to audit all state agencies’ handling of public records requests.

The legislative package is intended to address some of the ethics and public records issues that arose during the third and fourth terms of former Gov. John Kitzhaber. Brown took office after Kitzhaber resigned Feb. 18, amid federal and state criminal investigations into whether he allowed his fiancée to use her public positions to benefit her consulting business. Kitzhaber has said he is innocent of wrongdoing.

“Oregon’s government belongs to its people, and an informed, engaged populace is essential to democracy,” Brown said in a statement.



Jonathan J. Cooper/Associated Press

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown speaks to reporters at the state Capitol in Salem, Oregon Feb. 20. On Wednesday, Brown outlined a package of ethics reforms she said will increase government transparency.

velopment and energy issues that overlapped with her contracting business.

The ethics commission had sought legislation for a similar expansion of transparency in the governor’s office last year, but that effort was rebuffed by the Kitzhaber administration, as first reported by the EO

Media Group/Pamplin Media Group Capital Bureau in February.

The governor’s staff are still working on details such as whether contract policy advisers would have to file the disclosures, Brown’s communications director Kristen Grainger wrote in an email.

“The statute currently says, ‘Any assistant in the Governor’s Office other than personal secretaries and clerical personnel,’” Grainger wrote. “This does not provide sufficient specificity.”

Finally, the governor’s proposed legislation would bar statewide elected officials,

including the governor and first spouse or partner, from collecting fees from speaking engagements while in office. Both Kitzhaber and Hayes were paid speakers, and Hayes’ contracts for this and other work brought in more than \$200,000 during the governor’s third term.

Brown has said she would like to provide more resources for the ethics commission, but Grainger did not offer specifics on any potential funding proposal.

It was also unclear on Wednesday by how much Brown would like to increase the maximum civil fine for misuse of public office, but the violation is currently punishable by a maximum \$5,000 fine on each count, plus any personal gain.

Chris Pair, a spokesman for Brown, said an audit of state agencies’ public records procedures could lead to additional future reforms.

“First we’ve got to figure out the scope of the problem,” Pair said. If lawmakers pass the audit legislation, it would likely take six to nine months for the Secretary of State’s Office to complete the review.

The Capital Bureau is a collaboration between EO Media Group and Pamplin Media Group.

New secretary of state working to implement registration law



Danielle Peterson, Statesman-Journal/Associated Press
Jeanne P. Atkins speaks to the media after being sworn in as Oregon Secretary of State during a ceremony Wednesday, at the state Capitol in Salem.

By PETER WONG
Capital Bureau

SALEM — Newly appointed Secretary of State Jeanne Atkins said she is already preparing to put into effect legislation linking voter registration automatically with driver records.

Atkins made the comments Wednesday after taking the oath from Gov. Kate Brown, who appointed Atkins to succeed her for the less than two years remaining in Brown’s second term.

“We have some resource issues to resolve with the Legislature to make sure we have everything we need to get it

done,” she said, in terms of money for the statewide voter registration system and Oregon’s 36 counties.

Brown said she will sign House Bill 2177, which was her top priority as secretary of state before she succeeded John Kitzhaber as governor upon Kitzhaber’s resignation Feb. 18.

Atkins, 65, is a longtime Democratic legislative and senatorial staffer. Her most recent position was state director for U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley, for whom she worked for more than a decade when he was Democratic leader and then speaker of the Oregon House.

She also was staff director for the Oregon Senate Majority Office more than two decades ago, and was a manager in the Oregon Department of Human Services.

“Now I have been given the opportunity to protect and strengthen some of our deepest values,” she said.

The secretary of state oversees elections — which are conducted by the counties — audits, public records and some small-business assistance.

Holding a Bible on which Atkins affirmed her oath was her husband, John, a former staffer to U.S. Rep. Les AuCoin in the 1970s and 1980s.

They have been married 43 years and live in Portland.

Also watching were their son, John, a third-year law student in Texas, and Terry Anne Paquette, Jeanne Atkins’ sister, who is a teacher in California.

Atkins made two unsuccessful bids for the Oregon House from Washington County in 1992 and 1994. She said she is not a candidate for a full term of her own as secretary of state in 2016.

“I had a very successful retirement going,” she said as people in the audience laughed. “It’s been described as an epic failed retirement by some of my friends.”

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