

Legislators weigh PERS options, but reach no consensus

Unfunded liability looming for state

By **CLAIRE WITHYCOMBE**
Capital Bureau

SALEM — A bipartisan work group aimed at reforming the state's Public Employees Retirement System started taking input on the issue Wednesday afternoon, but reached no consensus.

The system faces \$21.8 billion in unfunded liability — money it owes to PERS beneficiaries but cannot pay.

Though several commenters, including the mayor of Hillsboro and a Bend-La Pine School District board member, seemed to agree change is needed to both address growing costs to local governments

and meet legal requirements, it was not clear what direction the intended reforms may take.

While state Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, described PERS as a "supercharged and emotional" topic, it's also complex. Steve Rodeman, the executive director of PERS, spent the first 45 minutes of the meeting providing a high-level explanation of the system.

In 2013, the Legislature passed a set of reforms aimed at mitigating growing costs, but those reforms were largely struck down by the Oregon Supreme Court last year. As a result of the court's decision and low investment returns, public employers will have to contribute \$2.9 billion to the system in the next budget cycle, a hike of \$885 million.

The Legislature is allowed to make changes to current

public employees' benefits, but benefits that have already accrued cannot be altered, according to the ruling in that case, *Moro v. Oregon*.

With this parameter in mind, Johnson, and Sen. Tim Knopp, R-Bend, are leading the charge in an attempt to address the unfunded liability through a work group.

Legislative counsel has vetted 10 possibilities, and late last month released an analysis finding seven of them likely constitutional.

Johnson said the August findings by legislative counsel were not the only options available to legislators.

Senior Deputy Legislative Counsel Marisa James said that her office's analysis of those possibilities was largely in agreement with a legal analysis presented this

week by a Portland law firm, Bennett, Hartman, Morris & Kaplan, LLP, on behalf of five public employee unions.

In a letter submitted to Johnson and Knopp, representatives of those unions said they were "deeply skeptical" that the reform effort "is about finding 'solutions' or taking a broader look at all the budgetary challenges the state faces."

Several options

Some examples of those possibilities include instituting a \$100,000 cap on final annual salary used to calculate benefits, using a market rate for annuities, and calculating the benefit based on the average of the last five years of salary instead of the last three.

Another option would stop the practice of allowing

unused vacation and sick time payments to be included when calculating the final salary.

In the Aug. 31 letter, legislative counsel acknowledged that some of these possibilities, though likely constitutional, could prove politically controversial and risk being challenged in court.

The three options that didn't make the cut set by legislative counsel included changing the retirement age, reducing a factor by which years of service and final average salary are multiplied in the formula used to calculate pension benefit, or discontinuing the pension program altogether.

Increased costs

Cheri Helt, a member of the board of Bend-La Pine Schools, in comments to

Knopp and Johnson at the work group meeting Wednesday, said that her school district faces significant personnel cuts as a result of increased PERS costs.

Tim Nesbitt, a former adviser to former governors John Kitzhaber and Ted Kulongoski, in comments at the request of the Oregon Business Council, said that the state must be mindful of moderating cost increases as a percentage of local government and district payroll.

He said that continued increases could divert money from the local services that those districts and governments provide.

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

Toxin levels stall razor clam digs at Long Beach

The Daily Astorian

OLYMPIA, Wash. — Rising marine toxin levels have prompted the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife to delay upcoming razor clam digs at Long Beach and to review openings at other ocean beaches.

The department continues to watch toxin levels to determine whether razor clam digging can proceed at Twin Harbors, Copalis and Mocrocks beaches.

Fish and wildlife had previously set a tentative schedule of digs for Oct. 14 through Dec. 31 at the four ocean beaches.

However, digs at Long Beach are on hold until tests indicate toxin levels have dropped and the clams are safe to eat, said Dan Ayres, wildlife department coastal shellfish manager.

Test results on razor

clams dug recently at Long Beach indicate levels of domoic acid exceed the threshold (20 ppm) set by state public health officials. Domoic acid, a natural toxin produced by certain types of marine algae, can be harmful or even fatal if consumed in sufficient quantities.

Ayres noted that toxin levels also have increased over the past week at the other sites, but remain below the threshold set by public health officials.

"These latest toxin test results cast uncertainty on the fall razor clam season," Ayres said. "We hope this is a short-term spike in toxin levels that won't lead to closures at other beaches."

Elevated levels of domoic acid forced state shellfish managers to cut short the razor clam season in spring 2015 and delay the opening again last fall.

Poll shows support for repealing statewide ban on rent control

By **JIM REDDEN**
Capital Bureau

As housing costs increase across the state, a slim majority of Oregon voters support repealing the statewide ban on rent control — with the most support being in the Portland area.

According to a new poll by DHM Research, 52 percent of statewide voters support eliminating the existing ban on rent control.

Support is highest in the Portland area, where 58 percent support a change in Oregon laws to allow cities and counties to enact their own rent control policies.

Voters in the Willamette Valley are also supportive, but less so, at 52 percent. Voters elsewhere in the state are split on the issue: 42 percent support ending the ban and 44 percent oppose it.

State House Speaker Tina Kotek, a Portland Democrat, recently said she will ask the Legislature to repeal the statewide ban on rent control.

According to the poll, partisan politics play a role in the issue. Statewide, 60 percent of Democrats support repealing the ban, compared to 53 percent of nonaffiliated voters and 39 percent of Republicans.

DHM Research says the debate over rent control is happening at a time when many voters are feeling squeezed by the cost of housing. A little more than one-quarter of respondents indicate that their housing costs, including basic utilities, exceed 30 percent of their income.

Although the affordability issue affects residents from all parts of the state, in the Portland area, 28 percent of voters say their housing costs are too high. That compares

to 23 percent in the Willamette Valley and 25 percent in the rest of the state.

Portland-area voters are also the most likely to view housing in their area as unaffordable, regardless of their personal circumstances, the poll found. A majority of Portland-area voters — 56 percent — say housing in the community is not too affordable or not at all affordable. Just 6 percent of Portland-area voters say housing costs in their community are "very affordable."

In contrast, a majority of voters in the Willamette Valley (57 percent) and elsewhere in the state (54 percent) say housing in their community is affordable.

DHM Research is a wide-

ly-respected Portland polling firm. Its telephone survey of 517 registered Oregon voters was conducted from Sept. 1 through Sept. 6. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 4.3 percentage points.

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WILLIAM (BILL) LAWS
SEPTEMBER 11, 1961 - SEPTEMBER 14, 2016
Our beloved Bill Laws died suddenly on September 14, 2016, at the age of 55 in Jacksonville, FL, where he moved recently (less than 3-months ago) with his family. A resident of over 20 years in Seaside, Bill was known for helping others. He also enjoyed fishing and restoring classic cars.
Bill was born to William and Hazel Laws in Seattle, WA on September 11, 1961. He spent his early childhood in Seattle; his teenage years in Florida; and then moved to Hillsboro, OR where he met his wife of over 30 years, Teri Moreland-Laws. Bill was a very loving and caring husband.
The biggest love of Bill's life, his pride and joy, are his children: daughter Michon; "The Twin's" daughter Brooke and son Drake; and his grandson "Papa's Little Man" Tristen. Bill was preceded in death by his beloved son Robert.
Bill is survived by his wife Teri Moreland-Laws, his parents Bill and Lin Laws of Ilwaco, WA; brother Bob and sister-in-law Karmera Laws; brother Brian Laws and sister Arin; brother-in-law Dave Harnsberger; nephews Brandon, Darrin, Devin, Cody and Aiden; and countless cousins. Bill is also survived by his best friends Phil and Lauri Hullender; Rick James; Sam Rayburn; Mike Shade and many, many more friends.
Love Ya Bill.
Bill's family needs your help to bring Bill home and to relocate back to Seaside where they will have the love and support they need. An account has been opened at the Bank of the Pacific. Cash donations can be taken to any Bank of the Pacific branch, checks can be made payable to Teri-Moreland Laws. Teri and the kids want to thank everyone for their loving support. "It's meant the world to us." Bill's memorial service is in the works and will be announced.
There is a Gofundme account set up to help Bill's family. Please go to:
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