

Republicans submit signatures for provider tax referral

Voters could decide fate of tax in January

By **CLAIRE WITHYCOMBE** and **PARIS ACHEN**
Capital Bureau

SALEM — Pending final verification of about 84,000 petition signatures by state elections officials, Oregon voters will have a chance to weigh in on parts of the state's Medicaid funding plan in January.

Medicaid provides health care coverage to the poor and other qualifying groups, and is jointly funded by the state and the federal government. About 1.1 million people — a quarter of the state's population — are on the Oregon Health Plan, the Medicaid program.

Health care advocates, unions and many Democratic legislators argue that as many as 350,000 may see reduced benefits, or may be cut from the program altogether if voters reject the parts of the funding plan that got a step closer to the Jan. 23 ballot Thursday.

The Legislature passed a bill this year to increase fed-



Paris Achen/Capital Bureau
Patty Wentz, spokesperson for the Coalition of Community Health Clinics, answers questions during a press conference on Referendum 301 Thursday in Portland.

eral Medicaid matching funding by collecting assessments from the state's hospitals, insurers and coordinated care organizations — the regional networks of providers serving Medicaid patients.

A group of Republican lawmakers — state Rep. Julie Parrish, R-Tualatin/West Linn, Rep. Cedric Hayden, R-Roseburg, and Rep. Sal Esquivel, R-Medford — want voters to weigh in on parts of that plan,

referred to as the "provider tax."

According to financial impact estimates approved for the ballot last month, state revenues could decline anywhere between \$210 million and \$320 million if voters reject parts of the legislation in question.

Since the state uses those revenues to get federal matching funds, the total effect on the state budget could be upward of \$840 million.

The federal Affordable Care Act allowed states to extend eligibility for Medicaid to people making up to 138 percent of the federal poverty level. That's about \$16,642 for a single person and \$33,948 for a family of four.

That income group would likely face cuts in part because the federal government requires states to cover pregnant women and people with disabilities, but not people who, but for the Affordable Care Act, would not qualify for Medicaid, said state Sen. Richard Devlin D-Tualatin. And the state must cover all or none of those people.

Devlin said that it's unlikely that health care funding lost by a partial repeal could come from another part of the budget.

For example, it took months for legislators to approve an \$8.2 billion funding package for education, an amount many on both sides of the aisle argued should be higher.

"We don't have that much in dollars sitting on the side that we could use," Devlin, who chairs the Legislature's budget committee, said. "It would be beyond the current resources that we have."

The petitioners say that they don't want to cut people from the Oregon Health Plan — Hayden is a dentist who sees Medicaid patients, and Parrish says she grew up receiving Medicaid and other government programs — but they want to force a conversation at the Legislature about how the state pays for the system.

In a press conference Thursday afternoon, Parrish and Hayden maintained that the money could come from elsewhere in the budget. Parrish argues a proposal to move public employees onto plans in the exchange, for example, could save the state money.

"Budgeting is about choices," she said.

But other alternatives proposed by Hayden during the session were criticized as "part logic and part fantasy" in August by the chairman of the House Committee on Health Care, Rep. Mitch Greenlick, a Democrat in Portland.

The petitioners have labeled the legislation — which allows the state to collect payments from insurers, CCOs and the Public Employees Benefits Board as well as the state's hospitals — as a "sales tax on health care."

A coalition of more than 50 organizations is campaigning to keep the law in place and prevent cuts in the Oregon Health Plan that would likely result from a repeal, said Meg Niemi, president of Service Employees International Union Local 49. The union is a member of the Coalition of Community Health Clinics.

The coalition held a press conference in downtown Portland Thursday to highlight what is at stake if the referendum makes it on the ballot.

"Together, we're going to fight to protect health care for families, for kids and for the most vulnerable people in Oregon," Niemi said.

The law reduces health insurance premiums for those who purchase their own insurance but could mean increases for others of about \$5 per month in 2018, said Patty Wentz, a coalition spokesperson.

"We need people to vote 'yes' on Referendum 301 because it will protect health care coverage for a million people who are on Oregon Health Plan and lower premiums for hundreds of thousands more," Wentz said.

Coos Bay sues over restrictive flood regulations

Associated Press

COOS BAY — Coos Bay has filed a lawsuit in federal court against the National Marine Fisheries Service over its recommendation for more restrictive flood plain regulations, which would restrict develop-

ment in most of downtown. The World reported the suit was filed Thursday objecting to land use restrictions recommended by the fisheries service to the Federal Emergency Management Agency's flood insurance program in an opinion issued last year.

Damien Schiff, an attorney with the Pacific Legal Foundation, which is representing the city, said the biological opinion from the fisheries service is an improper expansion of both FEMA and the agency's authority. Fisheries is asking FEMA

to place high-risk flood plains off-limits to development because it says it will better protect endangered species such as salmon and steelhead.

Flood plains are areas along rivers, stream and shorelines that are regularly inundated with water.

Feds remove habitat protections for threatened sage grouse

By **MATTHEW DALY**
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Interior Department said Thursday it is withdrawing protections for 10 million acres of federal lands

used by the threatened sage grouse to open it up for energy development.

The plan would allow mining and other development in areas where it now is prohibited in six Western states: Idaho, Montana, Nevada,

Oregon, Utah and Wyoming.

The Bureau of Land Management, an Interior agency, said a recent analysis showed that mining or grazing would not pose a significant threat to the sage grouse, a ground-dwelling, chicken-like

bird that roams across vast areas of the West.

The proposal would affect less than one-tenth of 1 percent of sage grouse-occupied range across 11 states from California to the Dakotas, officials said.

Oregon might add protections for the marbled murrelet

Threatened bird has lost habitat

By **JES BURNS**
Oregon Public Broadcasting

A new report from the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife shows that despite previous protections, the marbled murrelet is still in trouble.

And now, the state is considering whether to list the sea bird as endangered under the state's endangered species act.

"Overall, it's an imperiled species, but ultimately the question of whether to up-list or not, that's a commission decision," says Christina Donehower of the Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The Fish and Wildlife Commission is expected to make that decision in February.

The murrelet was listed as threatened federally and by Oregon in the 1990s. Environmental groups are now asking for the change in status.

Donehower says changing the status would force the state to develop an official plan to protect the bird.

"Really the most direct effects of listing ... would be for state owned or leased lands," she says.



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Marbled murrelets are a threatened species.

Private forest lands could be affected as well. Changes in management of murrelet habitat could curtail timber harvest.

Marbled murrelets nest in mature coastal forests of the Pacific Northwest. Over the past 25 years, they've lost habitat on state and private lands at a much higher rate than on federally managed land.

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