

Key bills could impact all Oregonians

By **PARIS ACHEN**
Capital Bureau

Hundreds of bills, resolutions and referrals are lined up for lawmakers' consideration during the state Legislature's 32-day session beginning in February.

Among those, at least five concern issues that Oregonians deal with on a daily basis: health care, internet freedom, global warming, gas prices and electricity prices.

Health care

While some Republicans in Congress seek to roll back entitlements such as Medicaid and Medicare, members of Oregon's predominantly Democratic legislative assembly are hoping to receive the OK from voters to make health care a right under the state Constitution.

State Rep. Mitch Greenlick, D-Portland, has proposed a joint resolution to amend the Oregon Constitution and obligate the state gov-

ernment to ensure every resident has access to effective and affordable health care. The resolution refers the proposed amendment to voters in the November election.

The resolution coalesces with a bipartisan bill intended to bring more transparency to the way pharmaceutical companies set prices for prescription drugs.

House Bill 4005, spearheaded by Rep. Rob Nosse, D-Portland, would require prescription drug manufacturers to report increases in the price of medications and the costs associated with development and marketing. The proposal is modeled after a new law passed last year in California.

Two Democrats and two Republicans are sponsoring the bill: Nosse, Sen. Lee Beyer, D-Springfield; Rep. Ron Noble, R-McMinnville, and Sen. Dennis Linthicum, R-Klamath Falls.

The intent of the bill is to boost transparency and understanding of steep, and often

mysterious, increases in drug prices, said Greenlick, the chairman of the House Committee on Health Care.

"The hypothesis is that drug companies might have some shame," Greenlick said. "I haven't seen much evidence that they do, but there is a possibility that if the process (of setting prices) is open and in public, drug companies will be more restrained in what they do."

Net neutrality

House Majority Leader Jennifer Williamson, D-Portland, is seeking state regulations to discourage internet companies from blocking or charging more for certain content, a concept known as net neutrality. The Federal Communications Commission in December repealed net neutrality, prompting lawmakers in at least 15 states to introduce legislation to restore the protection in local jurisdictions, according to the Pew Charitable Trusts.

Williamson's proposal wouldn't go that far, but it would require state divisions to purchase broadband access from providers in full compliance with net neutrality provisions, as an incentive to providers to keep the internet open to Oregonians.

The providers would have to guarantee transparency in network management practices, full access to websites and equal traffic speeds, Williamson said.

She announced last week that she plans to amend an internet privacy bill, House Bill 4155, to include the net neutrality rules. That bill renews an attempt from last year to outlaw internet service providers from disclosing or selling customers' personal information without express consent.

Gas prices

One way to slow climate change is to reduce the amount of carbon emitted into the air. Democrats Sen. Michael

Dembrow of Portland and Rep. Ken Helm of Washington County have filed a bill to put a price on industry-emitted carbon, a concept called "cap and invest." Senate Bill 1507 would require companies to buy permits to emit more than 25,000 tons of carbon per year. Sold at auction, proceeds from the permits would go toward projects intended to curb greenhouse gases.

Dembrow has said that the program would likely drive up electricity and gas prices. While economic modeling has projected carbon pricing could drive up gas prices, there is no evidence of that at the pump in California, where a cap-and-invest program has been operating since 2013, said Tera Hurst, executive director of environmental group Renew Oregon.

About 100 businesses emitting 25,000 tons of carbon per year — including fuel suppliers, electricity providers, landfills and manufactur-

ers — would have to buy permits, according to the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality.

Electricity prices

Legislation by Republican Sens. Dennis Linthicum and Herman Baertschiger Jr., both of southern Oregon, have proposed an electricity Ratepayer Protection Act.

Senate Bill 1552 would cap public electricity providers' rate of return at 4.5 percent and would limit increases in fees.

It's unclear how that would affect residential rates, but the intention is to curtail any steep increases in prices.

The Public Utility Commission has no limit on how much rates can be increased each year, but under law, electricity companies have the right to request, but not receive, a return on par with similar companies.

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

Trump's infrastructure plan comes with a huge hole

By **JOAN LOWY and ZEKE MILLER**
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — When President Donald Trump unveils his plan to beef up the nation's infrastructure next month, it will include a crater-sized hole.

The trust fund that pays for most federal highway and transit aid is forecast to go broke in about three years unless the government significantly scales back its transportation spending or comes up with more money. But Trump's infrastructure plan is silent on the looming problem, an administration official familiar with the plan told The Associated Press. The official wasn't authorized to speak publicly about the plan and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Fulfilling a campaign promise, Trump's plan proposes to generate \$1 trillion in infrastructure spending over 10 years. But the plan seeks only \$200 billion in federal dollars, relying instead on state and local governments and private investors to come up with most of the rest of the money.

The administration views the plan as a supplement to current infrastructure spend-



AP Photo/Ted S. Warren

Truck and automobile traffic mix on Interstate 5 headed north through Fife, Wash.

ing. The money would be distributed through new types of programs that are designed to generate greater state and local government and private sector spending. Also, there's no guarantee how much of the money will go to transportation projects since the administration is broadly defining infrastructure as everything from building water treatment plants to expanding high-speed internet access to rural areas.

The administration is open to working with Congress to address the trust fund later, although those conversations haven't yet begun, the official said.

Republican leaders have been waiting to see what the White House will propose. There is wide, bipartisan support for continuing, and even increasing, transportation spending. But most lawmakers have been unwilling so far to

back tax increases or spending cuts to pay for it.

The federal government is currently spending \$15 billion a year more than the Highway Trust Fund takes in through gasoline and diesel taxes. Authorized trust fund spending for the federal budget year that ends in September is about \$56 billion.

"Addressing the solvency of the Highway Trust Fund is the most important infrastructure issue facing us today," said

Bud Wright, executive director of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, which represents state transportation departments.

"A failure to address the long-term solvency of the (trust fund) could mean a 40 percent drop in highway spending in 2021," Wright said. "We're hopeful the president will play a strong leadership role in addressing this challenge."

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce last week called for a 25-cent, phased-in increase in the federal gas tax to shore up the trust fund. Congress hasn't passed a gas tax increase since 1993, primarily because being associated with a highly visible tax hike felt by most Americans is viewed by many lawmakers as political poison. Asking lawmakers to vote for an increase in an election year seems a stretch. On the other hand, 26 states have raised their own fuel taxes since 2013 without significant political repercussions.

The American Trucking Associations has proposed increasing the wholesale transportation fuels tax by 5 cents a gallon a year over four years — a little less visible than an increase at the pump. That

would generate about \$340 billion over 10 years, the group estimated.

Passing the administration's infrastructure plan without bolstering the trust fund would amount to "taking one step forward and two steps back," said David Bauer, executive vice president at the American Road & Transportation Builders Association.

Michael Sargent, a transportation and infrastructure expert at the conservative Heritage Foundation, said the administration appears to view the trust fund shortfall as "Congress' problem."

And, even if it's not in the infrastructure plan, "a gas tax increase is still on the table — the administration hasn't written it off," he said.

Chris Spear, president of the trucking group, said passage of a tax overhaul bill last month provides lawmakers with political cover if they decide to raise fuel taxes.

"You have a situation where the White House and Congress sent historic amounts of money back to the taxpayer," he said. "We're here to help this president get a bill passed ... but there has to be real dollars in there."

State penalties tripled for underage pot sales

Associated Press

PORTLAND — The state has announced it will temporarily increase penalties for those who unintentionally sell marijuana to minors.

The announcement was made Thursday by the Oregon Liquor Control Commission, which oversees the state's recreational marijuana industry.

It comes on the heels of a statewide sting in December

in which almost 20 percent of state-licensed marijuana retailers sold pot to customers under 21.

The commission's executive director Steve Marks called the results of the operation "unacceptable."

In response, the commission announced it will triple penalties for those who sell marijuana to minors unintentionally.

Those first-time offenders will now face a 30-day license suspension or a fine of \$4,950.

The previous penalty was a 10-day license suspension or a \$1,650 fine.

The temporary rule will take effect today and remain in effect for six months.

Ex-Fish and Wildlife employee found guilty of rape, burglary

Associated Press

OLYMPIA, Wash. — A jury has found a former top staffer at Washington's Department of Fish and Wildlife guilty of rape and burglary in connection with the rape of a co-worker in 2014.

The News Tribune reported Gregory Schirato was found guilty Wednesday of second-degree rape and first-degree burglary in Thurston County Superior Court.


Thurston County prosecutors allege the former agency division leader broke into the home of a co-worker after a holiday party and raped her while she slept. Schirato was arrested four months later.

Court documents show the alleged victim went to a party on Dec. 17, 2014 and returned home intoxicated.

She said she woke up the next morning to find her clothes undone and a door window broken.

Investigators say they linked Schirato to the incident through DNA evidence.

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