

Brown wants assurances for Oregon's pot industry



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press
President Donald Trump reportedly made a deal with a Colorado senator to protect the legal cannabis industry there, but it's not clear whether it extends to Oregon.

Trump cut deal with senator from Colorado

By CLAIRE WITHYCOMBE
Capital Bureau

SALEM — Gov. Kate Brown wants President Donald Trump to assure her that Oregon's legal cannabis industry is safe from federal prosecution.

The president reportedly made a deal last week with a Republican senator from Colorado to protect the legal cannabis industry there, but it's not clear whether it extends to Oregon.

Trump told U.S. Sen. Cory Gardner that he would support

"a federalism-based legislative solution to fix this states' rights issue once and for all," according to Gardner's office.

In return, Gardner promised to stop blocking the White House's Department of Justice nominees.

There's long been dissonance between federal drug laws and those of states that have legalized marijuana, but the withdrawal of previous Justice Department guidance on the issue — known as the Cole memo — has prompted more uncertainty around the issue in recent months.

That memo from the Obama administration set out guidelines for federal prosecutors in states that had legalized marijuana to focus their resources on larger-scale concerns such as trafficking as

long as states met certain conditions regarding their regulation of the industry. Attorney General Jeff Sessions rescinded the Cole memo, giving federal prosecutors discretion in pursuing drug cases.

According to Gardner, the president said that the rescission of the Cole memo "will not impact Colorado's legal marijuana industry."

White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said during a press conference Friday that Gardner's statement was "accurate" and that Trump was a "firm believer" in states' rights.

The White House press office did not respond to a request for clarification on the matter late Friday.

Brown, a Democrat who

has been vocal in her opposition to many of the Trump administration's policies, said in a written statement Friday that she would "appreciate" assurances from the president.

"We have not had similar negotiations, but would appreciate President Trump extending his assurances to all states that he respects their rights to decide how to approach this issue, not just to Colorado," Brown said. "I remain committed to keeping cannabis in the state of Oregon, but out of the hands of children, while protecting the will of Oregonian voters, who overwhelmingly support the legal cannabis industry and the jobs it creates."

Members of Oregon's congressional delegation took to Twitter on Friday to call for

addressing the issue in Congress, including Democratic U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden and Democratic U.S. Rep. Earl Blumenauer.

"The federal government must respect the decision Oregonians made at the polls," Wyden wrote on Twitter. "I'm going to keep fighting to protect Oregon's legal marijuana program and pushing for national reform."

"We can't take anything for granted," Blumenauer said in a Twitter post. "Trump changes with the wind & GOP leadership is still in our way. We need to protect the integrity of state-legal marijuana programs by acting NOW."

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Study: PERS better funded than most, but still short

By CLAIRE WITHYCOMBE
Capital Bureau

SALEM — A new study from the Pew Charitable Trusts finds Oregon's public pension system might be better funded than those of most other states, but is not doing enough to pay down its unfunded liabilities.

The country's state pension funds reported a \$1.4 trillion deficit in 2016, up \$295 billion from 2015, according to a study released Thursday by Pew's Public Sector Retirement Systems Project. Oregon's unfunded liability, the amount by which the system's obligations to retirees exceed what its assets can cover, is \$25.3 billion.

"Many state retirement systems are on an unsustainable course, coming up short on their investment targets and having failed to set aside enough money to fund the pension promises made to public employees," the study states. "Even as contributions from taxpayers over the past decade doubled as a share of state revenue, the total still fell short of what is needed to improve the funding situation."

In 2016, Oregon's Public Employees Retirement System was 81 percent funded — compared to a national average of 66 percent — according to the study.

An actuarial analysis released in September, though, indicates that the funded status of the state's system, including side accounts that allow certain employers to offset payroll rates, has since declined to 75 percent.

Oregon took an incremental step toward paying down some of the system's unfunded liability this past legislative session. Senate Bill 1566 sets up an incentive system for public employers

that set extra money aside to pay their PERS bills.

In Oregon's system, state and local public employers that are PERS members contribute funds. That money is invested, and the returns on those investments constitute most of the benefits paid out to employees.

Although 2017 was a year of strong investment returns, the same volatility that can bring high returns one year can bring harsh losses the next, the study noted.

Last year, the PERS board lowered its assumptions about how much the state's investments would earn from 7.5 percent to 7.2 percent.

The study found that from 2014 to 2016, many states, including Oregon, did not contribute enough money each year to pay down the debts.

"There is no one-size-fits-all solution to the pension funding shortfall and the budgetary challenges facing individual states," the analysis states, "but without new policies that commit states to fully funding retirement systems, the impact on other essential services — and the potential for unpaid pension promises — will increase."

However, Pew's analysis did not account for Oregon's use of what's called a rate collar, a method the state uses to stave off dramatic increases in how much employers are paying toward PERS.

The study also looked at an indicator called "operating cash flow ratio," which measures the difference between money flowing out (essentially, benefit payments) and cash before investments (essentially, employer and employee contributions), divided by the level of assets at the beginning of the year.

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Buehler in hot seat over skipping debates

By PARIS ACHEN
Capital Bureau

SALEM — Knute Buehler's absence at county-level gubernatorial candidates forums and debates for the GOP nomination for governor has alienated some of the most politically active members of his party, some Republicans say.

The Bend orthopedic surgeon and state representative must edge out nine opponents in the May 15 primary to win the nomination. The winner will challenge Gov. Kate Brown, a Democrat, in November.

Yet he has largely declined to face off in public with the front-runners in the race, including retired naval aviator Greg Wooldridge of Portland and Bend businessman Sam Carpenter.

"We believe Knute considers himself the presumed nominee, therefore he does not feel the need to meet with his Republican Party voters. I guess we'll see how that strategy works out for him in a month," said David Gulliver, campaign manager for Carpenter.

Rebecca Tweed, Buehler's campaign manager, said Friday that Buehler is "focused on defeating Gov. Brown and is meeting voters every day all across Oregon at community, business and political party events. ... He will continue this schedule now through November and after the election, as governor, when he defeats Kate Brown."

Buehler was scheduled to attend a candidates forum with Washington County Republicans Saturday, during which party members planned to question the candidates and vote for whom to endorse in the gubernatorial primary. But as an editorial endorsement forum, the event is closed to the public, said Tracy Honl, chairwoman of Washington County Republicans.

Meanwhile, Buehler declined an invitation to attend a public gubernatorial forum organized by the Hood River Republicans later that day,



State Rep. Knute Buehler has declined invitations to most county-level public forums and debates for the GOP nomination for governor.

said Lauren Ales, a forum organizer.

Susan Dawson, past president of Yamhill County Republican Women, said she was disappointed that both Buehler and Wooldridge missed that organization's public candidate forum in McMinnville Thursday. Both candidates sent stand-ins from their campaigns to answer questions, Dawson said. Wooldridge has attended several other public forums and debates with his opponents in March and April.

"I understand you can't go to everything, but it really does help to see the candidates in person answering questions and being able to talk," Dawson said. "I think it makes a big difference."

Buehler's television ads also address only why he is a better choice than Brown, the sitting governor. He makes no mention of his opponents, including Wooldridge, who won a Republican straw poll for governor at the Dorchester Conference in Salem in March.

"He is ignoring his opponents in the ad in the way he is ignoring voters in the primary," said Jonathan Lockwood, a communications consultant for Wooldridge.

While Buehler has declined most public faceoffs with his opponents, he does meet with voters in more intimate settings. For instance, Buehler attended a Washington County Republicans meetup in February where he introduced himself, met face to face with participants and answered questions, Honl said.

"We see quite a bit of him in Washington County," she said.

Political consultant Russ Walker, who also works for Wooldridge, said avoiding debates is an old strategy.

"If your candidate doesn't look good at forums and debates, you avoid them at all costs," unless the host of the forum or debate plans to issue an endorsement at the end of the event, Walker said.

Jim Moore, political science professor at Pacific Uni-

versity and director of the Tom McCall Center for Policy Innovation, said Buehler is using a strategy that worked for Brown when Buehler attempted to unseat her as secretary of state six years ago.

"It's an incumbent strategy: I am the strong front-runner so I will go to closed meetings, but I am not going to go to ones that are open and give free advertising or coverage to my opponents to advance themselves at my expense," Moore said.

"It's a strategy that works if you make the assumption that you are so far ahead that you don't want to give your opponents any facetime so they appear equal to you in the public's eye. It's better if the opponents complain that the candidate wouldn't come here and talk to us, because it looks like little kids who are not allowed at the big people's table."

There haven't been any publicly released scientific polls since the March primary election filing deadline that show whether Buehler is safe to make that assumption, Moore said.

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Buehler narrowly wins straw poll in GOP race for governor

By JEFF MAPES
Oregon Public Broadcasting

State Rep. Knute Buehler eked out a narrow win in a gubernatorial straw poll held Saturday by the Washington County Republican Party.

Buehler beat retired naval aviator Greg Wooldridge by just one vote while Bend businessman Sam Carpenter was third.

Buehler, an orthopedic surgeon from Bend, has been the establishment favorite to win the primary and take on Democratic Gov. Kate Brown in the general election.

But he's been struggling to win over Republican activists upset that he's criticized President Donald Trump, described

himself as pro-choice on abortion — and has not opposed every gun-control measure that's come before the Legislature.

Wooldridge defeated Buehler at another straw poll held at the annual Dorchester Conference last month. Buehler has downplayed the importance of these straw polls but his supporters were pleased that he was able to win Saturday's vote.

State Rep. Richard Vial, R-Scholls, said he thought some conservative activists predisposed to vote against Buehler changed their minds after hearing him speak.

"I sat next to a few who said, 'Gee, I didn't think I was going to, but I'm voting for Knute,'" Vial said.

Wooldridge said he was pleased to come so close to Buehler despite the fact the latter has been far out-spending the other Republican candidates.

"I think it shows a surge on my part," he said.

Washington County Republican Chairwoman Tracy Honl

said her group decided to hold an unusual pre-primary endorsement meeting. Usually, official GOP organizations stay neutral before primaries. But Honl said local officials saw it as a good way to get precinct committee workers more excited about their work.

In any case, the party fell a

couple of votes short of having enough participants to make an official endorsement in the governor's race.

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