

OPINION



the Astorian

editor@dailyastorian.com

Founded in 1873

KARI BORGEN
Publisher

DERRICK DePLEDGE
Editor

JEREMY FELDMAN
Circulation Manager

JOHN D. BRUIJN
Production Manager

CARL EARL
Systems Manager

GUEST COLUMN

A suspicious silence on Brown's budget

Now we know why Gov. Kate Brown has been harping on Congress to send billions more in coronavirus-relief money to states. She is counting on that money to balance our state budget for the next two years.

"We need the federal government to stand up and respond to this moment of crisis," Brown said last week during her videoconference announcing her 2021-23 budget recommendations.



DICK HUGHES

For being a concrete document, the budget numbers can be interpreted in different ways. By my calculations, her overall budget proposal depends on more than \$30 billion from the feds, a 17% increase from the two-year budget that ends

next July. The state's core operating budget — the general fund and Oregon Lottery-funded programs — is recommended to be \$25.9 billion, a 3.2% increase.

Brown's constant drumbeat for more federal money has seemed odd, because I wondered who her audience was. Most governors and many economists already agree that Americans need renewed infusions of business loans, expanded unemployment benefits and other pandemic relief. Meanwhile, the six Democrats in Oregon's congressional delegation already are supportive, and Brown's words are unlikely to sway congressional Republicans or the Trump administration.

Her recommended budget counts on federal money for:

- COVID-19 testing, health services and the Oregon Health Plan;
- Rent forgiveness and mortgage relief;
- Renewed \$600 payments in Pandemic Unemployment Assistance;
- Support for families facing new economic stresses due to rising winter COVID-19 cases and resulting business closures;

- Renewal of the Paycheck Protection Program for small businesses;
- Child care assistance;
- Expansion of drug courts, rehabilitation programs and criminal justice reforms;
- Aid for schools and universities;
- Flexible funding for local and state governments, and;
- Continued help for Oregon's wild-fire-impacted communities.

Seeking equity in Oregon: Throughout 2020, Brown has emphasized equity in health care, education, economic opportunity and other areas. Her budget continues that focus, including \$280 million quickly



Cathy Cheney/Portland Business Journal

Gov. Kate Brown has released her two-year budget plan.

THE NUMBER OF STATE EMPLOYEES WOULD GROW 3.2%, TO 42,778 FULL-TIME EQUIVALENT. THAT FIGURE DOES NOT INCLUDE EMPLOYEES AT OREGON'S PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES. THE BUDGET ALSO NOTES THAT 12.4% OF STATE POSITIONS WERE VACANT AS OF JULY 1 THIS YEAR.

put together for programs sought by her Racial Justice Council.

"I believe the first step to creating opportunity is in recognizing that racism is endemic to our systems, impacting every part of our culture and our economy.

"Every difficult turn of this past year has only proven this point, further exacerbating existing disparities for Oregon's Black, Indigenous, Latino, Latina, Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American and tribal communities," Brown said.

"This budget delivers on decisive investments to begin the process of recognizing and undoing systemic racism in Oregon."

Silence is not golden: The Legislature actually writes the state budget, and it's always a question as to how much attention lawmakers will pay to a governor's priorities.

It's intriguing that neither of the presiding officers — state Senate President Peter Courtney, of Salem, and House Speaker Tina Kotek, of Portland, both Democrats — issued press releases to praise or even note Democrat Brown's proposal.

The minority Republicans did speak out.

Senate Republican Leader Fred Girod, of Lyons: "Gov. Kate Brown's proposal is a ship without a rudder. She panders to

political interests but fails to support all hard-working Oregonians.

"Gov. Brown demands Congress send Oregon money, however, millions of funds from the first federal coronavirus relief package have gone unspent. Money from the federal government has limitations, and there is no guarantee that federal money will go towards the holes left in the governor's budget. Clearly, the governor has been asleep at the wheel."

House Republican Leader Christine Drazan, of Canby: "We are in the middle of an unprecedented public health crisis and Gov. Brown has proposed direct cuts to our hospitals and health care services. Oregon's budget is not facing a structural shortfall, this is (a) public policy choice the governor has made in her proposed spending plan for the state. She is making a mistake by cutting health care and the Legislature should reject it. Health care should be prioritized, not put on the chopping block or punted to the federal government. ..."

The budget did elicit appreciation from state Labor Commissioner Val Hoyle, a Democrat who holds a nonpartisan office: "I'm grateful that Gov. Kate Brown's recommended budget makes significant, desperately needed investments in civil rights and workers' rights enforcement. We also

very much appreciate the investment recommendations for our business Technical Assistance division, which has been critical in communicating the rapidly changing landscape for small businesses in Oregon."

The Bureau of Labor and Industries budget languished under Commissioner Brad Avakian. Hoyle has turned the agency around, gaining plaudits from Republican and Democratic legislators.

Mostly mum lawmakers: I am signed up for all the newsletters that legislators issue through their offices. As of Thursday afternoon, only a few newsletters mentioned what lawmakers call the GRB — Governor's Recommended Budget. Most, including Kotek's, have focused on the new COVID-19 ratings for counties.

An exception was the newsletter from Sen. Michael Dembrow, a Democrat from Portland, who writes a daily report on the coronavirus in Oregon and sometimes other issues.

In his Tuesday evening newsletter, Dembrow explained the budget process: "The release of the GRB is of course just the first step in the budget process that will be much of the focus of the 2021 Legislative session that will go from January to June. Each of the specific budget proposals will need to be analyzed by the Legislative Fiscal Office (LFO) and reviewed by a legislative budget subcommittee, which will hold public hearings on all the budget. Many are controversial and will be the subject of much discussion and debate. Some of the proposals will emerge more or less intact. Some will be reduced and others increased by legislative action. But overall the GRB is an important platform and framework."

Budget tidbits: Brown's overall budget proposal includes a nearly 21% increase for the state court system, including additional judges in Deschutes and Douglas counties. ... The Secretary of State's Office wants a 27.5% budget increase. ... Oregon State Police would have 27 fewer employees. ... Three minimum security prisons would close. ... Brown included \$190 million for increasing pay and benefits for state employees. ... Construction projects include \$10 million for mothers' lactation rooms, wellness rooms and gender-neutral restrooms at Department of Administrative Services facilities.

The number of state employees would grow 3.2%, to 42,778 full-time equivalent. That figure does not include employees at Oregon's public universities. The budget also notes that 12.4% of state positions were vacant as of July 1 this year.

Dick Hughes has been covering the Oregon political scene since 1976.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Removing barriers

Derrick DePledge's excellent interview with outgoing Astoria City Councilor Jessamyn Grace West (The Astorian, Nov. 28) highlighted the benefits and value of having diverse representation on our elected boards, and the challenges experienced by those who step up to serve.

As a community we'd do well to broaden that conversation beyond diversity of age, length of residency and political views to include the racial and ethnic diversity that exists, and is growing, in Clatsop County.

It is often true that the best solutions to the issues we're dealing with come from those closest to the problem — we'd all benefit from the creativity and resiliency of communities and individuals who experience the greatest barriers to community connectedness and prosperity.

This will take understanding and removing barriers to service, especially for under-represented members of our community.

BRUCE WATTS
Astoria

What's best

I'm a sixth-generation Oregonian, and a professional fishing guide of 30 years. In the decades of Oregon river fishing I've gotten in before and after I started my own guiding service, the Owyhee River remains a favorite for me and some of my closest fishing buddies.

The Owyhee Canyonlands, or "Oregon's Grand Canyon," were carved through Eastern Oregon over millions of years. Today, this magnificent landscape has some of the best rafting, fishing and wildlife watching our state has to offer.

Additionally, the river, canyonlands and surrounding public land play a huge role in local economies, providing clean water for farmers, grazing lands for ranchers and much more.

But this wild, vast land's future isn't

a guarantee. Encroaching development brings threats to the wildlife and the way of life of the region. After spending decades fishing the Owyhee, I want to make sure that the next generation gets that same opportunity.

Sen. Ron Wyden, after collaborating for years with local stakeholders, introduced a bill to protect these special places forever. Combining over a million acres of wilderness designations, miles of wild and scenic river protections and common-sense economic development measures, the legislation is what's best for the Owyhee, Malheur County and Oregon.

Wyden, Sen. Jeff Merkley and Rep. Greg Walden: Let's get the Mal-

heur Community Empowerment for the Owyhee Act passed into law this year.

BOB REES
Clackamas

Predicament

On the predicament of the Warrenton Ross store: Perhaps Atlas Youngs Bay does not realize how integral to the community Ross is, from its rare selection of dresses in the area, its support of the Assistance League of the Columbia Pacific and the Boys and Girls Clubs, to its consistent senior discount, and for being one of the few places to find black slacks for work, among other things.

We do not need another Mexican restaurant, especially a chain, when we have so many good authentic ones, and a busy health clinic should have a place with its own parking lot.

Many stores are just another retail place, but the Warrenton Ross store is part of Warrenton's family. This particular Ross also excels in variety, organization and friendliness.

I'm sure there are other stores in the plaza that have back rent situations. I hope that Atlas will choose what is best for the community, and work with Ross to maintain its place both in our community and our hearts.

LINDY CADY
Warrenton

