

# OPINION



# the Astorian

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## GUEST COLUMN

# Legislature considers unexpected revenue

The Oregon Senate began passing legislation last week. But it's not yet time for Oregonians to worry. Or applaud.

Although committees in the Senate and House are considering countless contentious bills, it will be a while before those items reach the floor for votes.

Among those upcoming issues: What to do with the extra millions and millions of dollars that the Legislature unexpectedly has available to spend. State revenues are doing so well despite the pandemic that an income tax "kicker" refund appears headed for taxpayers.



**DICK HUGHES**

Gov. Kate Brown and legislative leaders also continue advocating for more coronavirus-related federal aid for states, including Oregon. Meanwhile, Oregon has not spent all the federal aid it already has received.

Given the unexpected revenue, state House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, said she doesn't anticipate needing to pass major tax increases to balance the state budget. However, legislators may pass bills that make the tax system more fair — fair at least in the eyes of the advocates.

The Legislature also will decide whether to make the federal stimulus checks exempt from Oregon's personal income taxes, as they are for federal taxes.

After being contacted by many "confused and angry" constituents, U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio, an Oregon Democrat, wrote to Brown, Kotek and Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, and



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asked that Oregon stop taxing the federal payments. State Sen. Dick Anderson, R-Lincoln City, and Senate Republican Leader Fred Girod, of Lyons, have introduced such legislation, but their Senate Bill 842 has not been scheduled for a hearing.

**Passing bills:** On Thursday, the Senate passed eight bills — the first of this year's legislative session. None was memorable.

But the tradition of initiating new legislators was. New Sen. Kate Lieber, D-Beaverton, was assigned to carry Senate Bill 37, which regulates real estate appraisal companies. Several colleagues peppered her with frivolous questions, including Sen. James Manning Jr., D-Eugene, who asked whether someone would have to pay fees on a pet duck.

A majority of senators then joined in appearing to defeat the bill before changing their votes. SB 37 passed 26-1. Sen. Dallas Heard, R-Myrtle Creek, who also

is the new chair of the Oregon Republican Party, voted against all eight bills on the agenda.

Like its predecessors, the 2021 Legislature has started with routine bills, ones that make slight, technical fixes in laws or had overwhelming bipartisan support in the 2020 Legislature but died when that session collapsed. In fact, most bills that become law are bipartisan.

However, bipartisanship alone doesn't guarantee smooth sailing. House Republican Leader Christine Drazan, of Canby, and Democratic Rep. David Gomberg, of Otis, are sponsoring House Bill 2638. The bill has been a priority of House Republicans. Ten have signed as co-sponsors. Democrats are not keen on it, making Gomberg an anomaly. But he is one of the few legislative Democrats with an extensive business background.

The bill would limit the liability of businesses and individuals for actions during the COVID-19 emergency so

long as they had reasonably followed government guidance. The House Subcommittee on Civil Law, chaired by Rep. Karin Power, D-Milwaukie, held a recent video hearing.

Drazan, Gomberg and a lobbyist testified in favor. Four opponents then spoke.

One of the co-sponsors, Rep. Raquel Moore-Green, R-Salem, took to the House floor this week to complain that the time for testimony ended before nine supporters could speak, including Tom Hoffert, the CEO of the Salem Area Chamber of Commerce.

Three opponents who signed up to testify also were unable to do so. As of Thursday afternoon, the bill had not been scheduled for additional testimony or work.

**Goodbye, Rep. Hernandez:** Speaker Kotek last week stripped Rep. Diego Hernandez, D-Portland, of his committee assignments. Hernandez has resigned, effective March 15, instead of facing a House vote on whether to expel him over allegations of sexual harassment and creating a hostile workplace.

The House had been scheduled to vote last week on that measure, HR 1. With Hernandez's resignation now irrevocable, action on the measure was delayed to March 16, when the measure will be tabled indefinitely.

**Alas for the Round-Up:** Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athena, pointed out that none of the contestants on a recent episode of "Jeopardy" answered this question: "September is when thousands of rodeo fans are driven into northeast Oregon for the annual Pendleton ..."

The answer, of course, is the world-famous Pendleton Round-Up.

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

*AFTER BEING CONTACTED BY MANY 'CONFUSED AND ANGRY' CONSTITUENTS, U.S. REP. PETER DEFAZIO, AN OREGON DEMOCRAT, WROTE TO BROWN, KOTEK AND SENATE PRESIDENT PETER COURTNEY, D-SALEM, AND ASKED THAT OREGON STOP TAXING THE FEDERAL PAYMENTS. STATE SEN. DICK ANDERSON, R-LINCOLN CITY, AND SENATE REPUBLICAN LEADER FRED GIROD, OF LYONS, HAVE INTRODUCED SUCH LEGISLATION, BUT THEIR SENATE BILL 842 HAS NOT BEEN SCHEDULED FOR A HEARING.*

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Sense of hope

The coronavirus pandemic has underscored the importance of medical research. As Congress addresses the needs of our nation's most vulnerable, they're also working to address another disease affecting millions of Americans — Alzheimer's.

My family has been impacted by Alzheimer's. My mom suffered for over 10 years. I watched my dad struggle to meet the demands of caretaking, while also navigating the emotional, physical and financial stress Alzheimer's puts on families. Sadly, in June, we lost my mom to this disease.

Today, over 5 million Americans are living with Alzheimer's, a number expected to triple by 2050. In Oregon, 69,000 people are suffering from Alzheimer's and that is projected to rise to 84,000 by 2025. Without medical breakthroughs, this number will continue to rise.

U.S. Rep. Suzanne Bonamici can play an important role in addressing this issue. By increasing funding for Alzheimer's and dementia research at the National Institutes of Health by \$289 million, Bonamici could provide millions of Americans a sense of hope.

With these increases, scientists can work quicker to advance basic disease knowledge, explore ways to reduce risk, uncover new biomarkers for early diagnosis and drug targeting and make discoveries that can lead to a treatment or cure. We can't afford not to fund research.

As our nation continues its collective focus in 2021 on keeping people safe and healthy, it is time to honor the requests of scientists for additional funding, so they can bring hope to millions of Americans affected by Alzheimer's.

KELLY KALKOFEN  
Beaverton

### Economic backbone

In response to Regan Fisher's letter, "Reinstate," on Feb. 20, I'd like to offer another view.

Contrary to Fisher's assertions, timber jobs and businesses have always been, and remain, the economic backbone of rural Oregon. The industry provides over 60,000 family wage jobs in Oregon, mostly in rural communities.

In many Oregon counties, forestry jobs are the best around. In Clatsop County, forestry jobs pay almost twice as much as the

average annual wage. Our community can't afford to lose these good-paying jobs.

While we can agree that county budgets are tight, and critical services are underfunded, a variety of events caused that reality. It is short-sighted to target the forest sector for causing these budget shortfalls.

Now is the worst possible time to impose a new timber tax. Rural communities cannot afford it. In 2020, these communities have endured massive layoffs, and the worst wildfires in Oregon history and are struggling to recover and rebuild.

A new tax on timber will eliminate more jobs and businesses in rural communities that are already suffering multiple extreme hardships. Sixty-four percent of Oregonians oppose new taxes and regulations on businesses struggling to recover, according to a January survey funded by the Oregon Business & Industry Foundation.

Our focus should remain on restoring hundreds of thousands of acres of burned forests back to healthy, thriving forests that prevent future fires, protect water quality and capture and store carbon — not taxing the very people doing that work.

JENNY JOHNSON  
Astoria

### A big thanks

My wife and I headed over to the Clatsop County Fairgrounds for our first COVID-19 vaccination on Feb. 25. The cars were lined up on the street, but moving, and the parking lot looked full, but a man pointed us west and we found a good spot. The line of people outside was long, and

it was cold and drizzling, but volunteers kept us moving quickly, and once inside the arena, we were greeted by more helpers, and we followed the line through the building until we arrived at a desk, where our names were checked off, and into the warm main hall we proceeded, where we received our shots.

After a 15-minute waiting period, we were comfortable and left.

The Clatsop County Public Health Department and their corps of volunteers coordinated this action flawlessly, helpful in each stop, and answered every question we had and processed hundreds of us.

A big "thank you" to the staff and volunteers for all the planning and thought that made this event a success.

MIKE GREEN  
Astoria



KUPER