

OPINION



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GUEST COLUMN

So, what did the Legislature do?

The far-reaching 2021 Legislature was the most expensive in Oregon history, approaching \$30 billion in basic spending.

Here are five takeaways from the 159-day session, which was conducted behind closed entrance doors at the Oregon Capitol in Salem.

1. Does anyone know what the Legislature did?

Plenty of issues made the headlines: law enforcement reform, wildfire prevention and recovery, housing and homelessness, mental health care, gun control, climate change, systemic racism, taxes, child care and more. However, so much transpired since the session began Jan. 19 that lawmakers across the political spectrum are still digging into what they accomplished, or not.



DICK HUGHES

"To be frank with you, I don't know all the things we've done," state Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, told reporters shortly after the Legislature formally adjourned on June 26. "I don't know the magnitude of what we've done or haven't done."

Other lawmakers echoed that sentiment.

2. Have money, will spend

In a stunning financial reversal, the Legislature was awash in money. The challenge turned from cutting spending — which lawmakers were doing only a year ago — to where to use the extra dough.

House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, said the Legislature finally regained ground lost during the Great Recession but also made additional investments. "I've never seen budgets like this in the state of Oregon," she said. "Never."

Sen. Dick Anderson, R-Lincoln City, who served on the Legislature's budget committee, put it differently.

"There's a philosophy of, 'If you've got it, spend it,'" he said. "I can see why budgets continue to grow, grow, grow."

The state was bailed out by billions in federal pandemic relief, including aid to agencies, businesses and nonprofits, along with expanded jobless benefits. The Oregon Employment Department has distributed \$9.6 billion in benefits



The Oregon Legislature adjourned a legislative session in June marked by the coronavirus pandemic.

since Gov. Kate Brown instituted business closures and restrictions in mid-March 2020.

3. Big spending creates big expectations

Kotek, Courtney and some colleagues worry whether agencies and service providers will meet the Legislature's commitments.

"One of the things we'll have to be really good about is keeping track of what's happening and making sure things are staying on track," Kotek said. "That really is an important question — that we're actually moving things in a way that helps people."

Other legislators agreed, saying that would be a priority once they take a brief respite to recover from the session. "After decades of this message of, 'The government is the problem,' I think we have the opportunity to demonstrate how we can help be part of the solution," said House Majority Leader Barbara Smith Warner, D-Portland.

4. Be ready for sunny days

This year's Legislature divvied millions of dollars among Oregon communities and organizations that had projects at the ready. Meanwhile, several billion federal dollars are expected to flow to Oregon transportation and infrastructure needs, thanks to U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio and others.

DeFazio, a Democrat of Springfield, chairs the U.S. House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure. The House on Thursday passed his \$715 billion INVEST in America Act, and the U.S. Senate is having its own infrastructure discussions.

One of this year's lessons is you never know when funding might be available for long-awaited projects, so don't sit on the sidelines. The then-Salem City Council made that error several years ago by setting aside long-developed plans for a second vehicle bridge across the Willamette River, which divides the capital. The bridge, a priority for rural transportation and urban com-

mites alike, has been a regional priority since the 1970s.

5. Women lead the way

Gov. Brown seemed an anomaly this year. Legislative leaders interacted with her regularly — virtually, instead of in-person, due to the Capitol health protocols. But Oregonians didn't hear much from her about the Legislature. The governor didn't even hold a press conference afterward to discuss the Legislature's accomplishments, although she did issue a congratulatory press release.

However, much of the supermajority Democrats' progressive legislation was led by women. Women were at the forefront of Republican efforts, especially in the House. No longer were rookie legislators, whether women or men, figuratively relegated to the back bench and expected to wait their turn.

"I think the Legislature grew up," said Sen. Lew Frederick, D-Portland.

Dick Hughes has covered the Oregon political scene since 1976.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dysfunction

Two recent articles have contained remarks by various Clatsop County officials which reveal, to me, a continuing level of dysfunction or administrative paralysis that has been present in the entire 15 years I have lived in Clatsop County.

Yet, the county is faced with an unprecedented housing crisis — a critical shortage of mixed-income housing units on the order of at least 1,000. This crisis can be solved only if the county government recognizes this emergency, declares it to be such, and takes immediate steps to allow developers to submit proposals to build mixed-income housing on county land that is outside the tsunami zone.

In our community, we already have a number of skilled architects, builders and land use planners who could move quickly to submit proposals. We also have no shortage of skilled craftspeople who are ready to go to work on these projects, in which some of them might eventually live.

The citizens of the county must stop accepting empty talk and demand real action. We have recalled county commissioners before, and we can do it again.

We elect county commissioners to govern on our collective behalf and in our collective best interest. Let us all unite to tell the county commission to stop dithering about stupid administrative details, or squabbling about the special interests they represent.

We need the county commission to take real action on the housing crisis, and the county commission is the only agency that can make this happen.

BARRY PLOTKIN
Astoria

Excited

As a member of Bethany Lutheran Church, I am excited about a project we embarked on about one year ago. We decided to build a multipurpose building on land we have owned since the 1980s directly across from our church.

This building would host many of our community events, such as Christian con-

certs, vacation bible school and our annual live Nativity scene. We could also partner with the Red Cross to use it as a shelter in the event of a natural disaster, severe storm or major power outage. It could also serve as a second warming center for our local community.

Many organizations, such as the scouting programs, Young Life and Good News Club are limited as to where they can meet. This could help with their search.

We feel that we would be giving back to our community by living our mission statement, "To know Christ — Live Christ — Share Christ."

I would like to thank the community in advance for supporting our endeavor, and ask that our City Council look upon our endeavor with kindness, and realize that our intentions our good, and we feel that

Bethany and the community will benefit from this project.

We ask that God will lead us in this project, and that he will watch over our community, its leaders and all our citizens.

LEWIS NIMMO
Deacon, Bethany Lutheran Church
Astoria

Eye-popper

Nicole Bales' story, "Tension emerges over county land use planning," (The Astorian, July 1) is a real eye-popper.

It looks like the Clatsop County commissioners intend to push the seated planning commissioners out, replacing them with "consultants," who are paid well with our tax dollars, and representatives of the

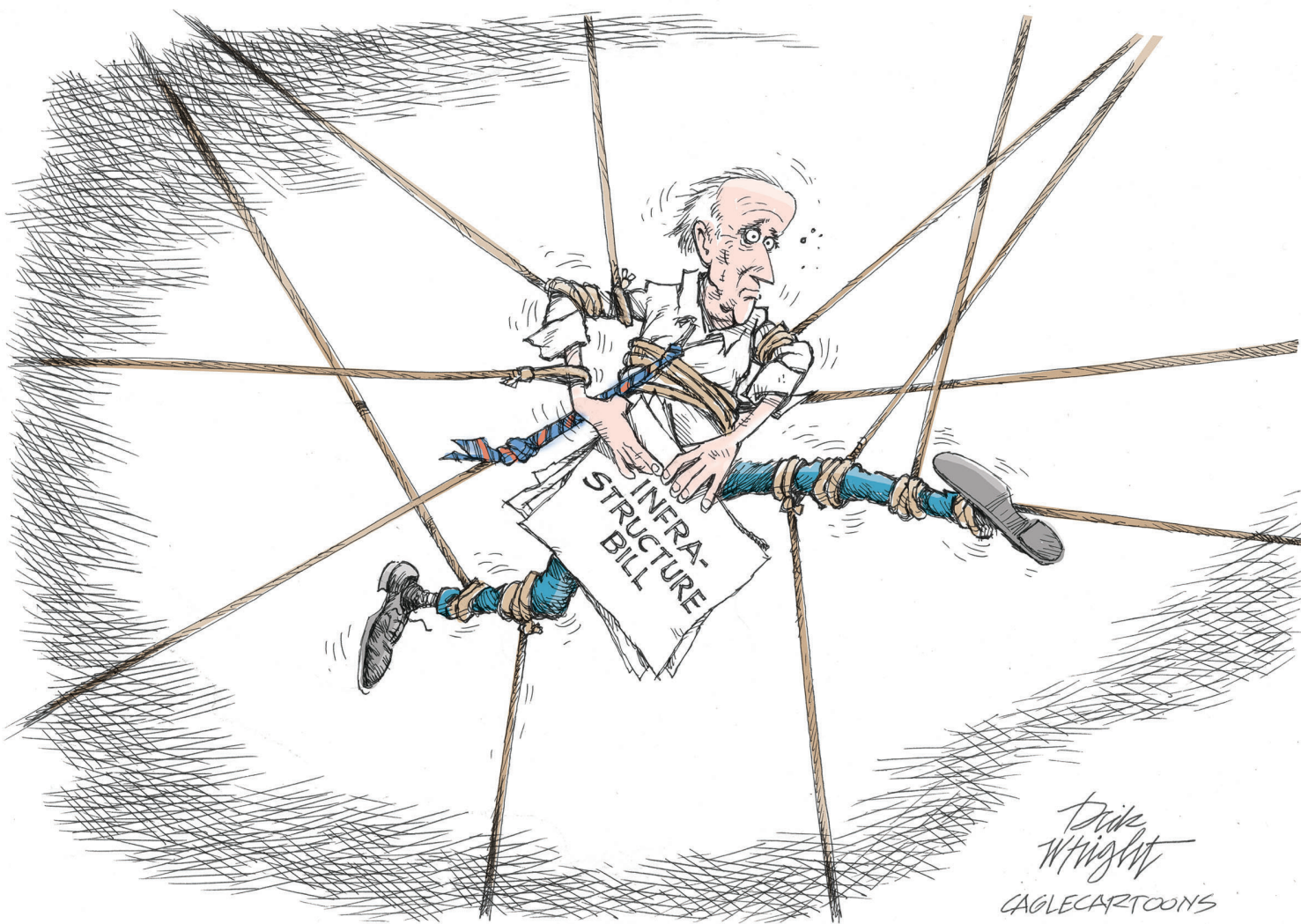
timber industry and their employers at Koch Industries.

This isn't just about trees. It's about everything the county does in terms of land planning, housing, food security, water supplies and so much more. We are privileged to live in one of the last places on earth that is still livable.

The migration here of climate refugees has only just begun. It is critical now to have transparent government that answers to the people, rather than the obscenely wealthy corporation that hits, and runs off, with what we still have to be exploited here.

It's essential people come together and push this back. The days of the company town really ought to be over.

SUE SKINNER
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Dike Whight
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