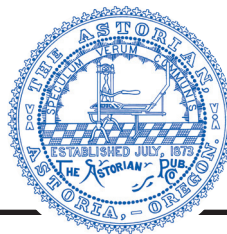


# OPINION



# the Astorian

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## GUEST COLUMN

# A frenetic agenda for short session

The Oregon Legislature could impose a sales tax on luxury cars, RVs, electronics, boats, snowmobiles, jewelry, guns, clothing and handbags.

Lawmakers might allow Oregonians to pump their own gas at service stations.

But the Legislature won't push year-round schooling for K-12 students, although state Senate President Peter

Courtney said that would help repair the damage that kids suffered during the pandemic. The 35-day legislative session that begins Tuesday in Salem doesn't allow time for such complex issues. Instead, lawmakers again will put money into boosting summer



**DICK HUGHES**

school programs.

So-called "short" legislative sessions in even-numbered years complement the "long" regular sessions in odd-numbered years, which under the Oregon Constitution can last up to 160 days.

Despite the pared-down agenda, the pace will be frenetic, the action swift and the outcomes highly uncertain.

During the Associated Press Legislative Preview last week, Senate Republican Leader Tim Knopp, of Bend, recalled that he was the last person in the Capitol during the 2020 short session because everyone else in the building got mad and went home.

That's only a slight exaggeration. The presiding officers — Courtney, a Democrat from Salem, and House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland — abruptly adjourned the session days before the constitutional deadline because all the Republicans walked out except Knopp in the Senate and Rep. Cheri Helt, of Bend, in the House.

This year's prospects are dicey as well. Here are five factors at play:

### 1. Why are we here?

Oregon's state government runs on a two-year budget cycle. The Legislature met every other year, often with special sessions in between, until voters in 2010 adopted length-limited annual sessions. The 35-day sessions were to deal with budget issues that cropped up, fix problems in previous legislation and ... what?

Republicans consistently contend that the supermajority Democrats usurp the purpose of short sessions by bringing in



Associated Press

A short session of the Oregon Legislature opens Tuesday.

big issues better handled in long sessions, if at all.

2020's abiding outrage to Republicans was the Democrats' reworked carbon cap-and-trade bill, which had failed the previous year. This year's dealbreaker could be House Bill 4002 requiring overtime for agricultural workers. House Republican Leader Vikki Breese Iversen, of Prineville, called it the elephant in the room. Rep. Andrea Salinas, of Lake Oswego, and other Democrats are resuming their battle for agricultural overtime after that proposal died in the 2021 Legislature.

### 2. Tensions within government

One of briefest measures, sponsored by Republicans, undoubtedly is dead on arrival in the Democrat-controlled Legislature. House Joint Resolution 201 would terminate Gov. Kate Brown's March 8, 2020 executive order declaring a state of emergency over the COVID-19 pandemic.

Democrats will back Brown on this. Yet they're displeased with her administration in other areas, and not just unemployment and rental assistance payments.

One concern is the state's perceived lack of progress in mental health care. Legislators put more money into such programs, but they now are unsure whether the money is going where they wanted. Courtney said that raises the question of how far the legislative branch should go in overseeing the executive branch. Legislators' patience is running out.

### 3. New faces, no relationships

So many legislators have departed in

recent months that lawmakers haven't met some of their new colleagues. The pandemic curtailed social events, funded by lobbyists and others, where people got to know one another on a casual basis. Meanwhile, health protocols have restricted interactions in the Capitol.

The latest newcomer, Rep.-designate Travis Nelson, D-Portland, will be sworn in a half hour before the 2022 Legislature convenes Tuesday morning. He replaces Kotek.

Virtual committee meetings mean legislators aren't sitting next to each other, chitchatting before — and sometimes during — meetings. A hallmark of Oregon's legislature is that D's and R's sit next to each other in committees instead of being on separate sides as in Congress.

Meanwhile, four of the key House leaders are starting their first session in their roles: House Speaker-nominee Dan Rayfield, D-Corvallis; House Majority Leader Julie Fahey, D-Eugene; Breese Iversen as Republican leader; and budget committee co-chair Tawna Sanchez, D-Portland.

Such new leadership could mean a fresh start, a less-combative middle and a cooperative ending. Or not.

On the other side of the Capitol, Courtney is serving his final year in the Legislature before retiring. The longest-tenured Senate president in Oregon history, Courtney has been a collaborative, moderating influence while partisan divides have grown and his own Senate Democratic Caucus has moved to the left. How will his role play out in 2022?

### 4. Election year

As in any session, but more so during a

campaign year, expect lots of public politicking and backroom dealing that make a legislator look good. Or bad. Lawmakers' speeches on the Senate and House floors rarely change minds, but they do create clips for political campaigns. Not only are many members running for reelection, but some are going for higher offices, such as Congress.

House members cannot fundraise during a session, which helps explain why two legislative combatants have resigned before the session starts. Former Speaker Kotek and former House Republican Leader Christine Drazan, of Canby, are both running for governor.

Pollsters rank Oregon as likely electing a Democrat for governor this year. But FiveThirtyEight reported on Thursday, "Republicans might even have a shot at their white whale — the Oregon governor's office, which they lost by just 6 points in 2014 and 2 points in 2010."

Oregon's largest labor union has now endorsed Kotek. Service Employees International Union's influence will mean significant financial and volunteer resources for her campaign. Meanwhile, Drazan's campaign announced that she is the first Republican gubernatorial candidate to raise more than \$1 million for this year's race.

### 5. The pandemic

The ever-changing pandemic presents many unknowns. The Legislature has perhaps an extra \$2 billion to spend, much of it for one-time investments. Brown wants a half-billion of that set aside to shore against future budget shortfalls.

Issues exacerbated by the pandemic — including housing, employment and health care — already are high on the agenda. "Short sessions were built for this exact moment," Rayfield said.

Meanwhile, two of Oregon's favorite prohibitions could go separate ways.

The Legislature has gradually eroded the full ban on self-serve gas. This year it might go all the way. House Bill 4151 has bipartisan backing from several key legislators amid intense support and opposition from the public.

However, the retail sales tax on luxury items, which would finance \$750 monthly stipends to low-income Oregonians, likely is dead on arrival. House Bill 4079 has only one sponsor, retiring Rep. Brad Witt, D-Clatskanie.

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

## GUEST COLUMN

# A place on your bookshelf

At a recent holiday party from that long-gone year 2021, I ran into Bob Pyle, who presented with toenails painted red and green for the occasion (sandals, no socks). As one friend noted, "He was self-decorated." Or as Bob simply put it, "Grandkids!" It was so great to see Bob on our side of the county. I know he gets around, but venturing to the northern tip of the peninsula is quite a journey, especially this winter.

The sad truth is that the last time I saw Bob was way, way too long ago: it was at a special poetry reading in Oysterville where Bob and I shared the stage with Washington state poet laureate Tod Marshall. That was so pre-COVID it seems like another century. So it was thrilling to update my Robert Michael Pyle file with this recent sighting.



**CATE GABLE**

And I can report that Bob continues to be his lively animated self with his wide-ranging intelligence and sense of humor intact. He and I spoke of many things, fools and kings, and landed of course on writing. He is understandably proud of his most recent publication, a book of poetry with accompanying photos by Judy VanderMaten — "The Tidewater Reach: Field Guide to the Lower Columbia River in Poems and Pictures."

As he said in an interview from the book, "Over the last couple years I've written and performed and published more and more poetry, and I came to realize its special attractions and capabilities. While many readers will pass by an essay because of the time it takes to read, they can enjoy any of these poems in a minute or two or a few." In fact, remembering our reading, I mentioned another of Bob's poetic talents: "I always admire a poet who can write a humorous poem. That's not easy." And it's not.

Poetry can carry a range of sentiment but is generally thought to be more suited to the weightier side of human affairs — unrequited love, the approaching footsteps of death, musings on mortality, the vagaries and outrage of war, and — rightfully so in our age — the political and activist voices attempting to deepen our awareness of racism, climate change, misogyny and violence. But in Bob's most recent book, his witty, knowledgeable and wry sense of humor shines forth like our sun windows on a gloomy day. "Tidewater Reach" is an unusually clever hybrid of a book.

### 'Tidewater Reach'

Susan Piper, publisher and editor of the Columbia River Reader, a monthly newspaper out of Longview, and Hal Calbom, writer and producer, are the people behind this beguiling book. Bob and Judy had schemed about collaborating on a

book for years, and when Susan and Hal got wind of the idea they joined the collaborative team to make it happen.

As Susan said, "Bob and Judy had flown their book idea by a publisher or two and had gotten nowhere, so when Bob floated the idea to us, in an offhanded way — we had written a profile on him and asked him his five favorite books, and one of them was his and Judy's not yet published book! — we thought, well, why not? Hal and I work really well together so we made it happen."

"We wanted the book to encourage a different way of seeing where we live — we wanted people to open their eyes to the beauty and understanding. So we got the idea of combining Bob's poetry and Judy's photos with information to make a sort of field guide — combining the science with the poetry of a naturalist. It started out as sort of a joke, the idea of a field guide, but I think it works."

I agree. That's why I call the book beguiling, because along with Judy's extraordinary photos and Bob's clever poetry we have small snippets of information, written by Hal, about all things riverine — basalt geology, the ecosystem of piling topknobs, Columbia River history, ferry fog, buoys, boat cradles — and one of the best explanations of tides and tide minutiae — neap, king, high and low, syzygy — that I have read anywhere.

Just talking to Susan on the phone was enlightening. "The tidal reach (or tidewater reach), the push of salt water into the river, goes all the way to Beacon Rock." She also talked about the "reach" of the Reader. "Our news footprint is not very deep — but we go up to Castle Rock and down the coast to Ilwaco, including all the little towns on the coast. We have a distribution on both sides of the river of about 15,000 — concentrated in the Longview-Rainier-St. Helens areas."

### Small businesses, small publishers

"Tidewater Reach" has been published in three distinct editions. First was a black-and-white perfect-bound trade paperback for \$25. When that black-and-white edition came out, folks asked for color. So Susan and Hal complied, and now there's a collectors edition in beautiful color for \$35. There's also a signature edition that's a boxed version of both the black-and-white trade and a new color version for \$50. It's signed by both Bob, Judy and Debby Neely, who made woodcut prints for the cover and section dividers. The signature boxed edition is wire bound, similar to spiral but metal not plastic.

At a time when the monster in the room, Amazon, dominates sales, it's good to remember that patronage of our local booksellers — and publishers — is critically important to their sustainability. Although "Tidewater Reach" — capturing with exquisite subtlety our marine location — would be



Author Robert Michael 'Bob' Pyle and photographer Judy VanderMaten sort through images to pair with Pyle's poetry in the unique and informative 'The Tidewater Reach: Field Guide to the Lower Columbia River in Poems and Pictures.'

an engaging read for any coastal region, Bob's words and Judy's images tell our most intimate local stories. They illuminate and celebrate what's quirky and unique about our lower Columbia River communities.

One of my favorite threads running through the book is Bob's variety of "River Pub" glimpses: Desdemona Club, Duffy's Deck, the Duck, River Mile 38, Marias's, and the Fort George taproom. Then there's a poem titled "Ship Report," in a tip of the hat to Joanne Rideout's KMUN show; and even a poem dedicated to Karla Nelson, proprietor of Time Enough Books. Here's an excerpt from that poem for Karla — "I Cover the Waterfront:"

*Sometimes it seems the hopes of all mankind lie on display in a small-town bookstore, against all odds still open on a bleak December dock in a time when so much is going, going, gone.*

It seems Karla and Bob have a well-deserved mutual admiration society. As she says, "Whenever Bob comes to do a reading, the first thing he does is talk about the importance of independent bookstores. He's a class act — and when I heard him read 'I Cover the Waterfront' on KMUN, I choked up."

The books are available by ordering through Columbia River Reader or at many of the local independent booksellers on both sides of the river in our region. "Tidewater Reach" is a pleasure to hold; it provokes delights, both intellectual and emotional. I commend all who were involved in bringing us this treasure. It deserves a place on your bookshelf and in your heart.

Cate Gable writes the Coast Chronicles column for the Chinoook Observer.