

Sen. Thomsen, Rep. Johnson share thoughts on Leg. Session

Education a focus for both legislators

By **BEN MITCHELL**
News staff writer

The 2015 Oregon Regular Legislative Session began on Monday in Salem and Hood River Republican legislators Sen. Chuck Thomsen and Rep. Mark Johnson are gearing up to promote their bills while also facing a Democratic majority in both the House and the Senate.

The News talked with both legislators to get their thoughts on the upcoming session, what they're looking forward to, and challenges they expect to encounter.

Unsurprisingly, both Sen. Thomsen and Rep. Johnson mentioned education as one of their focal points for this year's session, as it has been in past sessions. Improving literacy for elementary-age school children, in particular, was a goal for both legislators, with Sen. Thomsen remarking that Oregon's graduation rates were "terrible" and that graduation rates are shown to increase if kids are on track with their reading benchmarks by third grade.

Rep. Johnson noted that Oregon has the lowest graduation rate in the U.S. and "while there are many factors (that) contribute to this statistic, there is little doubt that raising third grade literacy can have a dramatic impact on im-

proving our ranking." He added he would be working on "multiple proposals" to improve literacy, with the goal of having 95 percent of third-graders hitting benchmark within the next five or six years. Rep. Johnson also said he would be looking for economic development funds to help with science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education programs as well as career and technical education (CTE) programs in the Gorge.

Sen. Thomsen expected there would be a "battle" over education funding as Gov. John Kitzhaber's budget called for more money to be earmarked directly for early childhood education as opposed to depositing it in the state's school fund, where the money can be diverted to a variety of other education programs. Thomsen said he "like(s) the governor's ideas on early childhood education," but noted that other educational programs needed to be funded appropriately as well.

"My opinion is the percentage of the state budget that goes to the education budget from preschool to college level has been underfunded from what it was 10 years ago," he said.

Sen. Thomsen advocated for more money in general for education funding, but acknowledged that would likely require cuts in "human services" programs such as unemployment and childcare. Rep. Johnson felt that Gov. Kitzhaber "is more generous

to higher ed than K-12" and that "we've kind of allowed for trickle-down funding for education."

Both legislators are also looking at promoting automotive bills during the session. Sen. Thomsen said he had planned to introduce a bill that would reduce the amount of emissions testing required for cars, which he said should be every 10 years instead of four years.

"This program has been in the works for years and years and years and they've never really changed it," he explained. "Our cars are a lot more efficient these days — why are we making people come in with these new cars?"

"I'm doing this for consumer folks in my district that I think are getting charged for something that they do not need to be doing anymore," Sen. Thomsen added.

Rep. Johnson said he was planning on introducing a bill that would create a new license plate that would be emblazoned with a picture of Mt. Hood and was looking for local businesses to support it. "Creating this license plate not only highlights the magnificent beauty of the mountain, but also the endless tourism opportunities for native Oregonians and visitors alike," he said. "My bill would utilize the dollars from purchased license plates to support bicycle and pedestrian tourism in the Mt. Hood region."

As for challenges, Rep. Johnson said he would be "watching carefully for legis-

lation that can interfere with the right to farm for our ag industry in the valley." He said he was "especially concerned about legislation dealing with spray buffers and how that might impact our local farmers."

Rep. Johnson added that Republican bills that did not

have bi-partisan support would likely prove difficult to gain traction on as "we (Republicans) can't pass anything the (Democratic) majority doesn't want."

In the Senate, a Democratic supermajority will also likely make things difficult for Republican legislators,

according to Sen. Thomsen. "Now the votes in the Senate are 18 to 12 and the majority party can pass anything they want in the Senate," he said. "They would like to have Republicans vote on things with them, but (Democrats) don't have to do it."



Photo by Kirby Neumann-Rea

STATE STREET RESTROOMS

A Crestline Construction crew works on the city of Hood River's public restrooms at Third and State, the last major piece of the State Street Urban Renewal project that started in September 2013. The steel supports and roof were added last week. Targeted completion date is Feb. 22. The finished product will be a pair of restrooms and gathering space with public art and bike racks. The only existing downtown public restroom, and the only one in the city outside of the parks, is a non-ADA unisex toilet located in the basement of City Hall at Second and Cascade, accessible from in front of the police station.

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