

Portland Business

President Clinton signs fiscal 2000 budget

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

President Clinton signed a \$390 billion budget package today that provided money for more teachers and police officers. Acknowledging it fell short on many of his goals, he nonetheless said the bill represented "real progress" for American families.

"I am proud to sign a bill that I believe will give us a stronger, better America for the 21st century," Clinton said. The signing ceremony in the Rose Garden kicked off a busy week of activity for Clinton, who is heading west on Tuesday for fund-raising in California and the opening of the contentious World Trade Organization talks in Seattle.

Clinton spoke with uniformed police and about a dozen teachers behind him on the dais. A crystal apple was placed on the desk he sat at to sign the bill.

"We value education and this budget truly puts education first, continuing our commitment to hire 100,000 highly qualified teachers to lower class size in the early grades," he said. Funds to put more cops on the street "will make America a safer place," he said. The omnibus spending bill also included money to pay U.N. dues and protect more sensitive lands from development. But Clinton failed to win support for a prescription drug benefit for Medicare or changes to

shore up the retirement system. Lawmakers also ended their session without completing work on a patients' bill of rights, a minimum wage increase, and several other issues important to the president. Aides say that with Congress out of town, much of the president's activity will be aimed at nudging lawmakers to address unfinished business when they return to Capitol Hill next year.

"In the weeks and months ahead, we can achieve these vital goals if we keep in mind that the disagreements we have are far less important than our shared values and our shared responsibilities to the future," Clinton said. "With this budget we have helped begin that future."

The measure also included language that would allow direct food aid to rebels fighting against the Sudanese government. Clinton has not made a decision on the food aid, White House spokesman Joe Lockhart said.

Republicans claimed victory for rejecting administration plans for higher taxes on cigarettes and other items, and for leaving the Social Security surplus untouched, a claim which the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office disputes.

The GOP also forced the administration to accept a small across-the-board cut in spending, which actually limited the growth of the budget without reducing overall

spending. In lawmakers' absence, Clinton also plans a series of recess appointments. One is the reappointment of Bill Lan Lee, the acting assistant attorney general for civil rights who has faced strong GOP opposition over the issue of affirmative action.

After three fund-raising events Tuesday in California - one for Handgun Control and two to support Democratic candidates for Congress - the president arrives in Seattle for World Trade Organization talks.

Protesters worried about the danger that globalization presents to the environment and workers planned a large scale rally and march in Seattle just before Clinton arrives.

The president Clinton has been upbeat about the new round of talks. But there is concern that government ministers might not achieve any breakthroughs on lowering trade barriers and that protesters might overshadow the talks.

Critics of the WTO also are unhappy with the prospect of China joining the organization, despite widespread human rights abuses in the country. In addition to a keynote address at a trade ministers luncheon Wednesday, the president intends to speak to representatives of environmental and labor groups.

While in Seattle, he will sign a new International Labor Organization

treaty on child labor, a move Clinton is sure to use to address labor's concerns about world trade. Clinton is spending Tuesday and Wednesday night in Seattle and returns to Washington on Thursday. Also Thursday, the president is scheduled to attend a fund-raiser for outgoing Philadelphia Mayor Ed Rendell. Rendell is trying to retire campaign debts before taking on the responsibilities of Democratic National Committee co-chairman.

Meantime, administration officials and congressional leaders are looking for an opportunity to hold a bipartisan ceremony where the president can sign legislation that will eliminate some barriers for people with disabilities who want to work. The bill is chiefly sponsored by Sens. James Jeffords, R-Vt., and Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass.

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U. S. West wants to lower Oregon service standards

CONTRIBUTED STORY FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Shameful and Ludicrous, says PUC U S West claims that a new state law allows the telecommunications company to lower its service standards to levels comparable in other states. But the state's top utility regulator couldn't disagree more. The issue came up Monday, when U S West outlined its service performance over the past three months to the Oregon Public Utility Commission. The commission, which has long criticized U S West's service record, said the company has met several of the standards but falls short in other areas. PUC Chairman Ron Eachus saved his harshest rebukes, however, for U S West's interpretation of Senate Bill 622, explained in a letter from the company dated Oct. 29. Eachus said the law, according to U S West's take on it, would allow the company to operate under much lower service quality standards than before. He said that stance is "shameful and ludicrous" and dared U S West officials at the quarterly meeting to prove otherwise. "Find any editorial board that supported the bill, find any legislator, any legislative leadership, anyone involved in the negotiations willing to support that interpretation - that's my challenge to you," Eachus said. U S West maintains that statewide standards should be comparable to those for the rest of the country, and that the standards should be even lower for Oregon companies that participate in the regulatory guidelines spelled out in SB622. "The intent we have is to follow the letter of the law," said U S West spokesman Jim Haynes. "The key thing is that the bill itself is driving the commission toward standards that are the norm nationally." Eachus was having none of that argument. "I won't apologize for Oregon setting high standards," he said. The PUC does not have to abide by any of U S West's suggestions, Eachus said. But he interpreted part of the company's letter as threatening to sue if the rules are not adopted its way. During the quarterly hearing, the PUC heard that service is improving in some areas, but continues to suffer in others. U S West met the commission's requirement that it average less than two repair reports per 100 customers. That figure was 1.96 at the end of October. The company also met the standard for percentage of calls to its repair bureau that were answered within 20 seconds. The commission demands an 85 percent rate, and U S West reached that in September and October for the first time since March. But when it comes to access to US

West's business office, the company still lags behind the requirement that 85 percent of calls be answered in 20 seconds. In October, the rate was just over 50 percent; the standard hasn't been reached since July 1998. U S West claims that a new state law allows the telecommunications company to lower its service standards to levels comparable in other states. But the state's top utility regulator couldn't disagree more. The issue came up Monday, when U S West outlined its service performance over the past three months to the Oregon Public Utility Commission. The commission, which has long criticized U S West's service record, said the company has met several of the standards but falls short in other areas. PUC Chairman Ron Eachus saved his harshest rebukes, however, for U S West's interpretation of

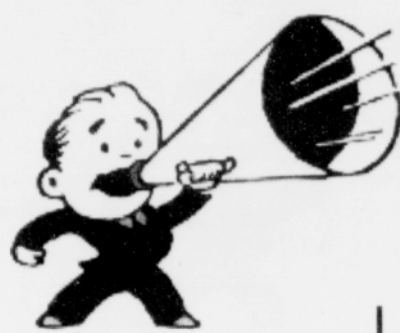
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