

## WAGE: Minimum wage is \$7.25 an hour in Idaho

Continued from 1A

Another coalition, Oregonians for \$15, is gathering signatures to raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour by 2019. The group has vowed to continue with the ballot measure if the legislature settles for anything less than \$15.

The competing plans on the table mean Eastern Oregon legislators have tough decisions ahead of them.

Rep. Greg Smith (R-Hepner) said in his professional life he works "every day" to create more family wage jobs through his business development company, so helping Oregonians support their families is a high priority for him. At the same time, however, he sees Eastern Oregon businesses' tax returns while helping them obtain financing. He knows that many of them would have to lay people off in order to afford a wage hike.

"I think it's very reasonable for there to be a modest increase in minimum wage," he said. "I want people to be able to take care of their families. But raising to \$13.50 an hour, that's a huge jump and I think it is going to have a negative impact on the economy."

He said the Republican caucus believes there needs to be a "long and thoughtful discussion" on the issue. But he also said that postponing a vote until the 2017 session may not be realistic, given the ballot measures planned for November.

Rep. Greg Baretto (R-Cove) spent three and a half hours Thursday at a public legislative hearing on minimum wage that he described as "rural Oregon versus metro."

Many Portland-area residents gave testimony about how difficult it was for them to live on minimum wage, he said, but Eastern Oregon residents who came on a bus

organized by Rep. Cliff Bentz (R-Ontario) did a "tremendous job" of explaining who the wage hike would hurt.

Seniors living on Social Security would have difficulty making ends meet as the cost of living inevitably rose, he said. Teenagers and college students would have difficulty finding work as entry-level jobs were cut. Farms, restaurants and hotels would take a significant financial hit. Communities hoping to bring in new industries would watch as corporations chose to locate across the Idaho border, where wages are \$7.25 an hour.

At the beginning of the hearing, Baretto asked the governor how much research had been done into how the proposal would affect the economy, job creation and unemployment. Brown answered the question by saying she knew there were "tons" of studies about minimum wage. She then

stated that her major concern was helping struggling families.

Baretto said it seemed that those spearheading the minimum wage hike were going into the decision based on emotional testimony instead of data.

"That, to me, is not wise leadership," he said.

The way to help Oregonians support their families, he said, is to create a business-friendly "Petri dish" ripe for job creation and recruiting businesses to the state.

Baretto said he hoped Eastern Oregonians will make their voices heard as a counter to Portland-area activists as the legislative session fast approaches.

"I think the letters and emails and phone calls need to be coming in full force," he said.

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## BUSINESS: Only 6.9 percent of Umatilla County workers make minimum wage

Continued from 1A

have to "kiss the business goodbye."

"I would probably have no employees other than myself," she said.

Jackson currently has two employees in addition to some help from workers in a job training program. If minimum wage skyrocketed, she said, so would her costs, and she would have to cut business hours and raise prices to compensate, which would likely result in a decrease in customers.

According to Fridley's report, nearly 90 percent of workers in the hospitality industry in Umatilla County make less than \$15 an hour. Vijay Patel, owner of the A-1 Hospitality Group that manages several area hotels, said a minimum wage hike would mean increased room prices and/or fewer employees.

A business paying 25 employees \$9.25 an hour can only afford to pay 16 employees \$15 an hour at the same cost, he said.

If prices for hotels, gas and food are cheaper across the Washington border, Patel said, it could mean losing business to the Tri-Cities and Walla Walla.

"If someone is staying in Hermiston, they might say, 'We might as well drive another half hour and get a better rate,'" he said.

One idea being floated by the legislature and Governor Kate Brown to divide the state into regions when setting the wage to address discrepancies in cost of living around the state.

According to data compiled by the National Low Income Housing Coalition, in Umatilla County a renter would need to make \$10.67 an hour at 40 hours a week to afford to live in a one-bedroom apartment at the fair market price of \$555 a month. They would need to make \$14.25 an hour to afford a two-bedroom apartment at \$741 a month.

The coalition estimates a worker could afford a one-bedroom apartment in Morrow County making \$9.13 a month and a two-bedroom apartment at \$12.37 an hour.

In Multnomah, Washington and Clackamas counties the same worker would need to make \$15.25 an hour to afford a one-bedroom apartment and \$18.15 to afford the average two-bedroom apartment.

Only 6.9 percent of Umatilla County workers made minimum wage, according to data from the Oregon Employment

Department. But even employers who pay more than minimum wage expect that a wage hike will affect their bottom line.

Joseph Franell, CEO of Eastern Oregon Telecom, said he pays his employees — all skilled laborers earning more than minimum wage — according to the standard for fair wages for telecommunications industry in the western states. He said he didn't see how an employee making \$16 or \$17 an hour would be content with their wages if payment for unskilled labor jumped to \$15 an hour.

"Suddenly you're saying someone 16 years old with no work experience is worth \$15 an hour," he said. "I'm absolutely confident there will be pressure to raise wages higher."

To compensate his employees fairly for their level of skill and experience he would have to invest less in the company's future, cut employees or raise the cost of service.

"Nothing's free," he said. "If you raise minimum wage by 50 percent, someone has to pay for that."

Lou Lyons, owner of Elmer's Irrigation & Supplies, said a wage hike would be detrimental to farmers, who are some of his biggest customers.

"If things get tight with the farmers ... they will spend less money," he said.

Proponents of the wage hike argue that it will pay for itself because workers who suddenly have a much bigger paycheck will respond by spending more money at local businesses. But Lyons said many minimum wage workers won't run out and buy irrigation equipment with their extra cash.

"We are a need-based business," he said.

Some businesses that hire mostly unskilled workers have taken the initiative to raise wages on their own in recent years.

Wal-Mart made headlines a year ago when it announced it was raising its internal minimum wage to \$9 an hour in 2015 and \$10 an hour in February 2016. The move made less of an impact in Oregon, where the minimum wage was already \$9.25 an hour, but workers who weren't affected by the 2015 increase will see their pay bumped up to at least \$10 an hour next month.

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## VAPING: Number of young people using e-cigarettes tripled in 2014

Continued from 1A

includes vapor bars where customers once could test equipment, try out e-juice flavors and vape while hanging out with others who were trying to kick smoking. Janet Jones, community educator at Umatilla County Public Health, is cautious about e-cigarettes though she knows people like Humphrey are successfully using them to break free of tobacco.

"We don't know enough about e-cigarettes and e-liquids," Jones said. "There are seven FDA-approved cessation products and e-cigarettes is not one of them."

It may be a matter of choosing your risk. The American Association of Public Health Physicians released a statement that vaping "could save the lives of 4 million of the 8 million current adult American smokers who will otherwise die of a tobacco-related illness over the next 20 years."

Former smoker Benny Hill, 36, doesn't worry whether vaping is harmful. Smoking is far, far worse, said the Pendleton railroad worker.

"I feel so much better," he said. "I don't get asthma anymore."

He is skeptical of the studies. He held up his "mod," a bulkier and higher-tech version of an e-cigarette. He listed the components inside.

"There's propylene glycol, vegetable glycerin, flavoring, a wick and a coil," he said.

And nicotine, of course. Hill said he started with 24 milligrams in his personal vaporizer and currently is down to 12. Humphrey has worked his way down from 30 milligrams to three.

**"My health has improved a whole bunch. I don't cough all night. I can't say it's healthy to vape, but it's better than smoking by a long shot."**

— Steve Humphrey, e-cigarette user

"The next stop is zero," Humphrey said.

One might think a person trying to quit smoking would prefer tobacco-flavored e-juice, but that isn't the case for Humphrey and Hill.

Hill prefers vanilla custard. Humphrey likes a customized root beer-based blend. There are thousands of options on the ever-growing flavor list.

"Vaping — it's a flavorful thing," Humphrey said.

At the Essence Emporium vape shop in Hermiston on Saturday, employee Robert Henderson stood behind the counter. He inclined his head toward long shelves filled with hundreds, maybe thousands, of bottles full of flavored e-juice. Popular flavors include French vanilla, melon, cinnamon, raspberry-filled glazed donuts and caramelized bananas, which Henderson said "is like vaping a dessert." Another flavor, Unicorn Puke, tastes like rainbow sherbet.

Some worry those flavors makes vaping attractive to youth and that vaping provides a gateway to smoking. Indeed, the Centers for Disease Control reported that the number of young people using e-cigarettes tripled in 2014. In November, however, a new CDC report said that only 0.4 percent of people who had never smoked tobacco were currently vaping.

Henderson, who himself quit smoking after switching

to e-cigarettes, said the Hermiston shop doesn't allow entrance to anyone 18 or younger.

Except for the exclusion of minors, the shop's clientele is demographically diverse. Recently, Henderson said, an octogenarian came into the emporium with quitting on his mind. The vape shop employee explained how the devices worked and even walked him 10 feet away from the shop so the customer could try vaping for himself without defying the indoor vaping ban.

"He had smoked since he was 13 and he wanted to switch over to vaping," Henderson said.

He turned away to wait on a customer just as his boss, owner Erika Friend, stepped into the shop. She slid behind the counter. Behind her on the wall, someone had written words on a white board: "No vaping allowed in shop per Oregon law."

Friend isn't a fan of the restriction on indoor vaping. She tracked business for the first eight days of the month and compared it to last year and noticed a dip.

"It's not a cut-and-dry crush," she said. "But business was down."

She worries that customers will buy from the Internet instead of vape shops. One of the appeals of walking into a vape shop was the ability to test devices (using a sanitary tip cover) and taste different

flavors before buying.

Friend worries even more about federal debate over whether vaping products should be classified as tobacco products and become subject to an extensive review process.

Oregon Senator Jeff Merkley, however, thinks putting the vaping industry on pause for a bit might be prudent. In a news release from February 2015, he wrote "as the electronic cigarette industry moves at breakneck speed to produce products with higher voltages that can deliver higher nicotine dosages at the whim of the user, the dangers of hidden formaldehyde will increase, including cancer risks."

Friend takes issue with the PSU study to which Merkley referred.

"Researchers did not use any kind of normal human use scenario — they took a device and fried it," she said.

About whether devices should be subject to FDA review, she insisted that vaping is already essentially FDA approved.

"Everyone says it's the Wild, Wild West and that there's no regulation — it's not true," Friend said. "All of the ingredients are approved by the FDA."

While debate over research rages on, Humphrey is simply grateful that vaping allowed him to escape the grip of tobacco.

"My health has improved a whole bunch. I don't cough all night," he said. "I can't say it's healthy to vape, but it's better than smoking by a long shot."

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## PRISON: Male inmate population was 13,386 as of Wednesday

Continued from 1A

how expensive correctional facilities are," said Sen. Richard Devlin, D-Tualatin, co-chairman of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means.

DOC's biennial budget failed to account for the cost because the state projection for the inmate population ballooned between April and October.

That means lawmakers might need to approve up to \$9.5 million in new expenditures at DOC during the legislative session that begins Feb. 1.

Some lawmakers have suggested they might have to raid a \$40 million Justice Reinvestment fund dedicated to paying for a suite of county-level support services designed to keep offenders out of prison. County officials have said such a withdrawal of funds could deal a deadly blow to the two-year-old Justice Reinvestment program.

The male inmate population was 13,386 as of Wednesday. The trigger for opening the 200 additional beds is 13,490, Peters said.

Inmate populations can vary from day-to-day, the DOC director said.

"When I look at these negative numbers I want to get excited and say, this is

the trend, and we are moving forward, but unfortunately, the variance is ever so slight," Peters said.

The Oregon Criminal Justice Commission has been spearheading an effort to urge and assist counties in curtailing the number of offenders that judges send to DOC. Each county in November received a target monthly number for reductions, which in concert would allow DOC to avoid opening the 200 additional beds at Deer Ridge.

"By all accounts, (counties) are doing a good job with the intake population," said House Majority Leader Jennifer Williamson, D-Portland, a member of the Oregon Task Force on Public Safety. "What we are seeing is people aren't leaving as quickly as we assumed that they would."

"I just want to make sure that we reflect on the record that counties are working hard to manage their input into the system," Williamson told the ways and means committee Friday. "This shouldn't be a reflection on them or their programming under Justice Reinvestment."

Programming differs from county-to-county but can include probation officers, counseling, mentoring, housing, substance abuse treatment, better criminal

case management and other services.

Williamson has committed to defending the Justice Reinvestment fund from a raid, but she faces a host of competing interests during the 35-day session in February and early March, according to lawmakers.

Sen. Alan Bates, D-Ashland, is pessimistic that DOC can avoid the expansion at Deer Ridge in the spring. Bates said he has visited all

but two prisons in the state.

"These prisons are jammed," Bates said. "These people are squeezed in every corner. Sooner or later, we are going to have to make some changes. Deer Ridge is the most logical place to expand now."

"I think when you come back in February, you are going to have to tell us you are going to have to open up more beds," Bates told Peters.

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