

A citizen's guide to finding your voice at the Capitol

By **CLAIRE WITHYCOMBE**

Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — When Oregon legislators convene on Tuesday, they could raise or lower your taxes, cut or boost government services and decide how much your landlord can hike the rent.

Interest groups, from the pharmaceutical industry to labor unions, spend millions of dollars lobbying legislators and contributing to their campaigns.

We asked former lawmakers and citizen advocates: how can an ordinary constituent, without the same cash or cachet, have an impact? Here's their advice to help you influence what happens at the Capitol

Get a group

The old adage holds: There is strength in numbers.

"Bills that get passed are the bills that the hearing room is full," said Bobbie Jager, school choice outreach coordinator at the Cascade Policy Institute. "They're bills that make senators take notice that it isn't just their opinion, it's their people and their constituents that want something, and things move usually that way."

Jager isn't a hardened political operative. She got her start in politics after she was named 2012 Oregon Mother of the Year.

After the honor brought her to the Capitol to address legislators, she was asked to lead a group of parents advocating for education reform.

If you're passionate about an issue — affordable housing, for example, or criminal justice reform — find a group that shares your interests and point of view. They will track proposals that could become law.

Julie Parrish represented Tualatin and West Linn in the House for eight years until she was defeated for re-election in November.

"We're all a special interest at the end of the day," Parrish said. "If you're a veteran, if you're a senior, if you're a mom with kids in school, (you) have an interest in what happens in our government. And there's some group out there that is speaking with your voice, and so go find them, and



AP Photo/File

Peter Bergel waves a flag during the Occupy Salem rally and march in 2011 at the Oregon State Capitol in Salem.

get involved with them, and they will help mentor you as well."

Parents and families of people with disabilities have proven some of the most successful lobbyists, Parrish said.

"We worked on things that mattered to families because families showed up," Parrish said.

Write to your legislators — in your own words

Whether you have your own idea for a change to state law or want to share your opinion about an existing proposal, lawmakers recommend writing a letter or email yourself and including your address so that they know you live in their district.

Most legislators want to stay in office, so they pay attention to what their constituents want. Many also hold town hall meetings in their districts where constituents can share their ideas or concerns.

To find your representative and senator, go the legislature's home page at www.oregonlegislature.gov.

Beware of emails from advocacy groups asking you to click a link to send a form letter to legislators.

It may be convenient, but doing that can result in thousands of identical messages that pile up in lawmakers' inboxes.

"Most of those aren't read," said former State Sen. Alan DeBoer, a Republican from Ashland who didn't seek another term last year.

Testify

If you have the means and time, testifying in person can be an effective way to

influence lawmakers. If you let your legislator know you'll be in town with a few days' notice, many will meet with you.

"I believe that at any level of government, direct interaction is probably the best way to go," said JoAnn Herrigel, deputy director of Elders in Action, a Portland group that advocates for older adults and educates citizens on the state and local political process.

Committee hearings, floor sessions and the whole building are open to the public.

If you're keeping track of a bill and see that it has a public hearing in a committee, you can testify.

You don't need permission to appear as a witness, which means you sit before a committee and share your thoughts about the issue it is considering. You also can submit your opinion in writing to be considered by committee members.

For the most impact, tell lawmakers how a proposal will directly affect you.

"I think personal stories go a long way," Herrigel said.

Do your research

Knowing your subject will make your comments more compelling.

A wealth of information on many topics is on the Legislature's website, and with a little practice it can be a helpful guide.

The legislative website provides direct access to each piece of legislation and its journey through the process, so you will know what committee is considering a bill, when it has been voted on by the committee

or a full chamber, and its next step.

You can sign up to get email notice about any particular piece of legislation so you can be aware of hearings and when to provide testimony.

And try tapping your local network for insights, including people who have served in office before or in another level of government.

City councilors, county commissioners, school board members and other local officials are easy to reach and are familiar with the Legislature.

Be mindful of political realities

How much influence you have can come down to politics, said Rich Vial, a Republican who served in the House for two years.

"Right now, partisanship decides what issues are going to get hearings, what issues are going to get leverage, what issues are going to get any kind of traction and what issues aren't," Vial said. "If it's not one that the majority party is interested in having go anywhere, forget it."

Democrat Courtney Neron beat Vial in November. That ouster was part of a wave election that replaced several Republicans with Democrats in both the House and Senate.

Frustrated by the power that the majority party holds, Vial wants to make the Legislature nonpartisan.

Many lawmakers fill their days with 15-minute "speed dates" with lobbyists, Vial said. Those lobbyists have influence over what lawmakers do because they hold the purse strings for campaign donations, which can be critical to getting reelected.

But, as a citizen, you have one other powerful tool at your disposal if you don't like what your lawmaker is doing: your ballot.

Reporter Claire Withycombe: cwithycombe@eomediagroup.com or 971-304-4148. Withycombe is a reporter for the East Oregonian working for the Oregon Capital Bureau, a collaboration of EO Media Group, Pamplin Media Group, and Salem Reporter.

City taking input on skate park plans

By **JADE MCDOWELL**

East Oregonian

The city of Hermiston is looking for input on a planned skate park.

Skateboarders, neighbors of the proposed park and others with an interest in the project are invited to give their opinions on Thursday from 3:45-5:15 p.m. at Hermiston High School.

The city aims to build the park on South First Street, just north of the high school and across the street from the building that houses Hermiston Police Department and Umatilla County Fire District. While the city already owned a part of the undeveloped property across from the public safety building, in 2017 it made a deal with Mitco Investments to lease

more land, allowing for a larger design, parking and landscaping.

Local skaters were first asked to give their input on the project in 2015, but the park was put on hold after an Oregon Supreme Court ruling that opened cities up to more liability for public use of parks. The legislature passed a bill protecting cities in 2017, and money for the skate park was included in the city's 2018-19 budget.

The city has retained California Skateparks, a skate park design and construction company, and representatives from the company will be on hand Thursday to discuss various design options for the park.

For more information, call Hermiston Parks and Recreation at 541-667-5018.



Staff photo by Jade McDowell

The city of Hermiston wants to build a skate park across South First Street from the building housing Hermiston Police Department and Umatilla County Fire District.

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Oregon finds discharges of 17 mentally ill patients improper

PORTLAND (AP) — Oregon officials have overturned a contractor's decision to force 17 severely mentally ill patients out of state-funded residential facilities after a newspaper and a nonprofit organization raised concerns, *The Oregonian*/OregonLive reported Friday.

The Oregon Health Authority had hired the Pennsylvania-based contractor Kepro to review the cases of about 1,600 patients in the facilities to determine if they all needed to be there. The review was part of a \$27

million contract for a three-year project, the newspaper said.

But after the newspaper reported late last year that at least three people suffered serious harm after discharge — including an older schizophrenic woman who was found wandering the streets catatonic and severely dehydrated after her release — the agency began taking action.

Disability Rights Oregon has also undertaken a months-long investigation into the contractor's work.

"Clearly, there was some room for improvement as

far as what OHA expected," said Saerom England, a state spokeswoman. "This is about the care, quality and safety of residents in the mental health residential system."

OHA has a team of three mental health professionals reviewing all of Kepro's care decisions and so far, the state has reversed the contractor in all of 17 cases they've looked at, the newspaper reported.

Kepro declined to address directly the reversals. Chief operating officer Meghan Harris said in an email that the company

is working to amend its contract with Oregon and believes those changes will "improve our ability to serve the state and the patients."

The patients whose cases were reviewed by Kepro included about 250 people living in locked residential facilities. State officials have said at least 215 people from those facilities have had to move elsewhere after Kepro decided they didn't qualify to stay.

The state's new oversight is limited to people who want to stay in a secure facility or move into one.

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