

Session: Legislators to address guns, wildfires and homelessness

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and to provide roughly \$120 million in funding to help create more shelters, build affordable housing and preserve existing affordable housing stock.

What’s at stake: The living arrangements for thousands of Oregonians who are confronted by rising rents and a thin supply of housing they can afford. Moving people off the streets and out of cars makes it easier to provide social services to homeless people who have mental health, addiction and other challenges.

Key players: Kotek, state Rep. Alissa Keny-Guyer, chair of the House Human Services and Housing Committee, and state Sen. Shemia Fagan, chair of the Senate Housing and Development Committee.

Mental health

The Issue: The Oregon State Hospital is struggling to accommodate an influx of patients from counties. Judges send defendants for treatment so they can participate in their own defense. In December, the hospital for three weeks stopped admitting other people needing treatment to make room for defendants.

The Oregon Health Authority wants \$20 million to add 50 beds to the hospital’s Junction City campus. The move would add 94 workers and shift some patients to the new beds, freeing up space in Salem. Lawmakers may consider



EO Media Group file photo

Built in 1883, the Oregon State Hospital has a 147-acre campus facing Center Street in northeast Salem. The facility is struggling to accommodate an influx of patients from counties.

providing more money for mental health services in communities across the state. Rep. Andrea Salinas, D-Lake Oswego, is proposing the state evaluate the need for more behavioral health professionals.

What’s at stake: The National Alliance on Mental Illness ranks Oregon as one of the states with a high prevalence of mental illness, and the state hospital has struggled to keep up with demand for its specialized services. Without more money, the state hospital could fall out of compliance with a court order, and then face new lawsuits or penalties over inadequate care.

Meanwhile, judges struggle to find places for those not requiring hospital-level care within their own communities, resulting in the release of people who need treatment.

Key players: Oregon Health Authority Director Patrick Allen; Oregon State Hospital Superintendent Dolly Matteucci; OHA Behavioral Health Director Steve Allen; Rep. Mitch Greenlick, D-Portland; Sen. Arnie Roblan, D-Coos Bay; and Rep. Andrea Salinas, D-Lake Oswego.

Wildfire

The Issue: Oregon could change the way it prevents

and suppresses wildfire. The governor’s Council on Wildfire is proposing better ways to plan fire suppression, assess risk and prevent fires. Gov. Kate Brown intends to ask for up to \$200 million over two years for the work.

Sen. Herman Baertschiger, R-Grants Pass, wants to modernize the state Forestry Department and expand its ability to use aircraft on wildfires.

What’s at stake: Despite an average fire season last year, where about 16,867 acres burned, the growing threat of climate change has lawmakers and forestry officials feeling like they got lucky. Wildfire costs in 2017

and 2018 set new records. Such costs are expected to grow if the state does not spend more to prevent and mitigate fires, placing continuing strains on state budgets.

Key players: Jason Miner, the governor’s natural resources policy advisor; Matt Donegan, chair of the state Council on Wildfire; Sen. Herman Baertschiger Jr., R-Grants Pass; and Sen. Jeff Golden, D-Ashland; the state Forestry Department.

Guns

The issue: Democratic lawmakers are making another attempt at a “safe storage” gun control bill. Another bill would allow local governments to ban firearms from public buildings.

What’s at stake: Advocates say their proposal is intended to reduce deaths and injuries in Oregon caused by guns. The legislation could also broaden the public buildings where guns could be banned.

Key players: State Reps. Rachel Prusak, D-West Linn; Janeen Sollman, D-Hillsboro; Oregon Firearms Federation; the NRA; Oregonians for Safe Gun Storage and Reporting Lost/Stolen Firearms; and Moms Demand Action.

Environment

The issue: Democrats are pursuing limits on greenhouse emissions by industry in their latest version of a cap-and-trade program.

What’s at stake: Scien-

tists say the impact of climate change grows more distinct each year and environmentalists contend Oregon needs to be a leader at taming damaging emissions. But opponents in industry and agriculture say new costs would harm employers and consumers.

Key players: Sen. Michael Dembrow, D-Portland; Sen. Arnie Roblan, D-Coos Bay; Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem; and Sen. Herman Baertschiger Jr., R-Grants Pass.

Campaign finance

The issue: Oregon is one of a handful of states that don’t limit donations to political campaigns. Supporters say major donors have an outsized influence on Oregon politics while opponents say campaign donations are a form of free speech that shouldn’t be restricted. New limits could change Oregon campaigns because candidates would have less money to market themselves.

What’s at stake: Voters will consider a constitutional amendment in November that would free the Legislature to regulate campaign finance. Legislation could be considered that would script new campaign limits if that ballot measure passes. Key leaders, including the governor, have backed away from pushing such legislation for now.

Key players: Sen. Jeff Golden, D-Ashland; and Honest Elections Oregon.

Apartments: Building was condemned, vacant and inactive since 2011

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them again,” he said.

Wood said the property has been a problem since he moved to Pendleton 20 years ago. Built in 1909, the Edwards Apartments was condemned in 2011 amid frequent calls for service and public health and safety hazards. It’s been vacant and inactive ever since.

Councilor Paul Chalmers, the chairman of the commission, wanted to hold off on making a decision until members could consult with City Attorney Nancy Kerns about the city’s options.

“I don’t want this Edwards Apartments discussion to fall by the wayside, and six months down the road we’re having this discussion again,” he said. “I want to keep this in the foreground.”

Councilors eventually decided to hold a workshop ahead of the commission’s next meeting on Feb. 24.

After the commission meeting ended, mem-



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

The Pendleton City Council requested additional time to mull over a proposal to acquire the vacant Edwards Apartments complex at the corner of Southeast Dorion Avenue and Southeast Sixth Street in Pendleton. The complex, which was constructed in 1909, has sat vacant since it was condemned by the city in 2011.

bers met as the city council to take action on another empty structure.

The council voted to give developer Justin Pratt

a property tax refund for his project to turn 2601 S.W. Hailey from an old U.S. Forest Service office into a 33-unit apartment com-

plex, forgoing an estimated \$15,766 in property taxes over five years.

Councilor McKennon McDonald was the only

COUNCIL SETS TIMELINE FOR APPOINTMENT TO VACANT SEAT

PENDLETON — The Pendleton City Council officially declared the late Scott Fairley’s seat vacant and set a timeline for appointment at a meeting Tuesday. Applicants interested in the Ward 2 seat must submit a letter of interest by Jan. 31. The council plans to hold candidate interviews prior to its regularly scheduled Feb. 4 meeting. In the past, the council has typically made the appointment immediately following the interview. The appointee must reside in Ward 2, which includes the North Hill, Westgate, and the airport.

— Antonio Sierra, East Oregonian

councilor to vote against the tax refund, saying she would prefer the city institute a standardized housing incentive program.

The council also took action on several other agenda items.

- The council unanimously approved a sewer facility plan update, which includes a multimillion-dollar list of suggested repairs and improvements to the system over the next 20 years.

Public Works Director Bob Patterson said staff’s

main concern is the city’s compliance with the state’s water temperature standards for the sewer plant’s discharge. He added that there’s a “99.9%” chance the city will have to pull out of discharging into the Umatilla River in the future.

- The council also approved an update to the city’s fee schedule, including new or higher fees for nuisance abatement, the Pendleton Convention Center, the Pendleton Aquatic Center, park rentals, the Vert Auditorium, and dog licenses.

Grad rates: Umatilla County’s biggest districts are still behind the state average

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Pendleton School District

The Pendleton School District was one of the only districts in Umatilla and Morrow counties to post a graduation decrease last year, but Matt Yoshioka, the district’s director of curriculum, instruction and assessment, didn’t seem too worried about the slight drop.

“For us, it’s not concerning because it’s just 1%,” he said.

Yoshioka highlighted the Latino and American Indian graduation rates, which were both above the state average.

The homeless student graduation rate was also far higher than the state’s rate, a fact Yoshioka contributes to staff’s awareness of the issue and a foster system rule that allows students to stay in the district they started school regardless of where they move.

Pendleton’s 3.8% drop-out rate is higher than both the state and county average, but Yoshioka said it dropped compared to the previous year and is trending in the

right direction.

Yoshioka said Pendleton would still like to be well above the state average, and it will need to address the performance of Hawthorne Alternative High School, where only about 1 in 5 students graduated last year.

He said the school has put together a plan of improvement for Hawthorne, and staff recently visited a successful alternative school in Ashland to study their practices.

Pendleton closed the gap between American Indian students and the overall senior class to under 10 points, but the success of tribal students relies heavily on Nixyaawii Community School, a charter school that largely operates independently from the rest of the school district.

Nixyaawii Principal Ryan Heinrich said the school’s 75% graduation rate exceeded staff’s goal of increasing the graduation rate by 7% each year.

Nixyaawii’s graduation rate has fluctuated dramatically in recent years, but Heinrich is hopeful the growth is sustainable due to



EO file photo

Graduates meet with their friends and family outside of the Pendleton Round-Up Arena after the 2019 Pendleton High School graduation ceremony in Pendleton.

higher attendance and a new facility.

Morrow County School District

At just over 88%, Morrow County School District’s overall graduation rate for last school year is just shy of the administration’s eventual 90% goal.

“Once we get to 90%, we’ll try to get to 95%,” said Superintendent Dirk Dirksen. “We’re cautiously optimistic.”

Dirksen acknowledged the

district’s slow and steady race past the state average began after the 2011-12 school year, when the district graduated just more than 70% of its senior class on time.

“We didn’t have any type of GED program then,” Dirksen said.

Since the implementation of that program around five years ago, he said the district was seeing higher graduation and completion rates. The 2018-19 completer rate sits at more than 90%.

Economically disadvan-

taged students and homeless students saw marked percentage increases in their cohort rates from the year before, which Dirksen credits to the district’s one-on-one approach.

“We have a pretty robust wraparound program that helps support those kids, helps them get ready for school. Whether they need an alarm clock, a phone call, nursing support,” Dirksen said.

But while the number of diplomas is on an upward trend for some groups, students with disabilities and migrant students saw significant drops, by about 11% and 5%, respectively.

Dirksen is hoping an increase in state funding through the Student Success Act could help the district invest in more specific programming for those populations.

“We’re working diligently to meet student specific needs,” he said.

Pilot Rock School District

Pilot Rock’s 11-point drop was the most precipi-

tous graduation rate decrease of any school district in the county.

Pilot Rock’s small senior classes can mean a small shift in student performance can throw off the graduation rate: State data shows only eight of Pilot Rock’s 32 seniors failed to graduate.

Annie Tester, the principal at Pilot Rock High School, said the rate drop was just a case of a rough year rather than a systemic issue.

Tester said the class of 2019 included transfer students who were significantly credit-deficient and couldn’t make up the credits by the end of the year. Some students quit school entirely.

Tester said Pilot Rock’s size means staff knows all students by name and their parents, so it hurts when some students don’t succeed.

“It hurts because we see them in our community and we couldn’t save them from themselves,” she said.

Tester also serves as the high school’s senior advisor, and based on what she’s seen so far from the class of 2020, she’s confident the graduation rate will rebound.