Climate: Brown could face legal challenges

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saw last year, is there's (a) fair amount she can do on the cap side, and not much that she can do on the invest side," Dembrow said. "She can't actually create a market. And, so it's more of a regulatory approach."

The legislation would have used money from the program for projects to make transportation more efficient, for example, and help Oregonians adapt to climate change.

Brown's order likely wouldn't raise money for those kinds of projects, said Brad Reed, a spokesman for Renew Oregon, a coalition of environmental and renewable energy organizations. The group wants a climate change program for Oregon.

"She has a lot of ability to set targets … that will lower pollution, which has its benefits for health," said Reed. "And certainly, clean energy transition of any kind is going to create economic activity and all the good stuff that comes along with the clean energy, like cheaper electricity. ... But without the significant investments that were envisioned in the legislation, we have to wait a little bit longer for that kind of activity. She can't do that through executive order."

Brown considered an executive order on climate just last year, when Republicans had walked out over the 2019 version of cap-and-trade legislation. That bill's demise came in late June after it became clear not enough Democrats supported it.

At that time, Brown could have enacted a number of climate policies intended to reduce emissions, according to an assessment done last year by the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality and obtained by the Oregon Capital Bureau. A spokesman for the agency said in an email that the document is now "outdated."

According to that 2019 document, Brown could have imposed a new limit on emissions from industrial sources and on fossil fuels, like auto fuel and natural gas, imported to the state. Those limits could have been reduced over time and the state could have required businesses to buy credits or offsets for excessive emissions.

The 2019 document also said that Brown could have taken steps to "strengthen and extend" the state's low-carbon fuel standard, tightened regulations on landfill methane emissions, boosted energy efficiency standards for electric appliances and required new buildings to have electric vehicle charging stations.

The governor could face a legal challenge from opponents of a climate program.

Asked whether climate legislation could still come down the pike next year, or in a special session, Dembrow said he thought it was "too soon to say."

"I think we would want to see how the executive orders are working," Dembrow said. "My understanding is that we do want to go at this in a more comprehensive way than the executive orders allow."

Ultimately, he said, he wants to see the Legislature act itself.

"I'm hoping that we can do that, either in a special session or in a 2021 session, but I'm confident that at some point it will get there," Dembrow said.

Meanwhile, Renew Oregon continues to prepare measures for the November ballot while waiting to see what Brown and legislators do. One measure would cap greenhouse gas emissions and the other would require that all of the state's energy come from renewable sources by 2045.

Legislative leaders say climate is a key priority. Speaking on the House floor before effectively ending the session on Thursday, Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, said lawmakers "must take climate action this year."

Market: 'Most people just want a house that's put together and move-in ready'

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sold in the west Umatilla/north Morrow market, sold to list ratio was an average of 94%. In 2019, for 459 homes sold, the ratio was 98.7%.

"There are people that are overpricing houses that are not selling," he said. "We have astute buyers."

It can also go the other way. Members of the Columbia Basin Board of Realtors obviously have a bias toward people using a real estate agent — particularly those who can call themselves Realtors after getting certified by the National Association of Realtors. But those interviewed for the story said they had seen "for sale by owner" cases where people had significantly underpriced their homes.

"People are leaving $10,000 or $20,000 on the table, basically," Barak said.

One thing sellers can do to get the most value out of their home is to fix it up before they sell it. Hughes said people feel too busy these days to put a lot of time into fixing up a new house, and many of them aren't coming into a new home with extra cash on hand to immediately start remodeling or putting in new carpet.

"Most people just want a house that's put together and move-in ready," she said. "It's 'condition, condition, condition' where it used to be 'location, location location.'"

Hunter said she encourages clients to drive by a home before they schedule a tour, and so something like the condition of the home's exterior paint can make a big first impression.

Over time, the things buyers value have changed. Hunter said as more households have multiple vehicles, a three-car garage has become a more important amenity. Hughes said she sees a lot of clients looking for a shop, while Rebman said a big backyard used to be a big selling point. Now, homes with tiny yards often don't have trouble selling, as people figure it's less upkeep and watering, and their children could play at the park or school down the street. Barak said nationally, two top things people are looking for is a utility room and a pantry.

While the housing market in the area continues to do brisk business, pressure could be eased by new homes coming in. In 2019, according to Barak, Hermiston issued 62 building permits for new, stick-built homes (not including apartments, manufactured homes or townhomes). It issued 69 permits in 2018 and 44 in 2017. Pendleton issued 16 in 2019, 27 in 2018 and 18 in 2017.

The pace of new homes in west Umatilla County isn't expected to slow. New subdivisions representing hundreds more homes are in the works in Umatilla, Stanfield and Hermiston. Hermiston locations where developers have gotten annexations, zoning changes or other actions by the city include Elm Avenue, West Theater Lane, East Theater Lane, Diagonal Road and East Punkin Center.

Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

Umatilla County Commissioner John Shafer, left, shows Rep. Greg Walden images from immediately after last month's flooding during a tour of the Cor-Tek manufacturing facility in Pendleton on Friday afternoon.

Walden: Oregon to receive $500K for virus

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already taken by Gov. Kate Brown and U.S. Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley.

While the flooding is mostly a regional concern, the coronavirus case made Umatilla County a part of an international emergency.

The Trump administration told senators on Thursday that it would not meet its goal of making 1 million COVID-19 tests available by the end of the week, and some Portland doctors told KGW this week that they were frustrated by the lack of tests available to them.

Walden, the ranking Republican on the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, assured local leaders that both the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and private companies were ramping up production and distribution, and test kits would be available to hundreds of thousands of Americans in the near future.

Representatives from Umatilla County Public Health and Yellowhawk Tribal Health Center both recalled being inundated with calls from people concerned that they had contracted the virus.

Walden touted the $7.8 billion funding package Congress just approved to support COVID-19 response, with about $1 billion going toward state and local response. Additionally, the CDC also awarded Oregon $500,000 to help treat and prevent the spread of the virus.

Umatilla County Public Health Director Joseph Fiumara told Walden that he appreciated the federal help, but local public health agencies needed sustained support to make sure these kinds of emergencies are prevented.

"Public health is not seen when we do our job," he said. "It's not kept in the forefront. … Across the board, it's easy to cut a program that people aren't seeing results from, (but) the results are these things not happening."

The Oregon Health Authority has stopped short of recommending the cancellation of public events or mass gatherings, instead encouraging state residents to stay home if they're sick and wash their hands often.

Pendleton Mayor John Turner said the Oregon Schools Activities Association 2A basketball tournament at the Pendleton Convention Center was a "very large public health experiment" in the "petri dish" that was the Pendleton Convention Center.

While OSAA decided to move ahead with the event, Pendleton Human Resources Manager Andrea Denton said the city was taking more precautions by posting hygiene signs and hand sanitation stations around the facility.

While OHA hasn't announced any new presumptive cases since the March 2 incident, Fiumara doesn't think Umatilla County is out of the woods yet.

"We wouldn't be shocked to see additional cases here, and we're doing everything we can to minimize that risk," he said.

Although the coronavirus discussion ended his day, Walden spent most of his time in Pendleton talking about the February floods.

Walden said federal relief is available after Congress appropriated $17.8 billion to the federal government's disaster relief fund last year.

"So the good news is, if you're going to have a disaster, have it early," he said. "The money is there."

As Eastern Oregon communities wait for the federal relief request to wind its way through the federal bureaucracy, the state is now poised to come through.

Although the Republican walkout forced a premature end to the 2019 session in Salem, the Legislature's Emergency Board will meet Monday to appropriate $11.7 million for flood relief.

Water: An increase in rates, a decrease in usage

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sewer rates.

"Probably from a percentage standpoint, peoples' sewer cost went up higher than their water, but nobody ever calls it their sewer bill," Morgan said.

The median Hermiston water customer — the one in the middle of a lineup from largest to smallest user in town — used 3,600 gallons of water in January 2019 and 32,400 gallons in August, which makes it hard to talk about the "average" amount a customer's bill went up, even before factoring in that people also use different amounts of water in different years depending on weather.

Looking at just water, not sewer, the median user would have paid $46.57 for 32,400 gallons of water in August and $20.72 for 3,600 in January under the 2018 rates. Under the March 2019-March 2020 rates, the same user would pay $98.40 for 32,400 gallons and $31.80 for 3,600.

Flattened out over the course of a year, Morgan said they paid about $16 per month more for water and $20 more per month for sewer.

Another dollar or two will be added to their monthly bill now, as a built-in automatic increase for inflation bumped up water and sewer rates 1.8% at the beginning of this month.

When residents flocked to city hall last summer to protest the increased water and sewer rates, however, the ones who testified in front of the city council often told stories of much higher increases than average — sometimes double or triple what they had

Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

The city of Hermiston's wastewater treatment plant, constructed in 2014, was one of several capital projects that resulted in the need to raise water rates.

been used to paying. They shared how the increase had taxed their budget and turned their lawns brown.

"Seniors are having to choose between medications or water," resident Larry Smith told the council at the time.

Morgan acknowledged that in a usage-based system, the people using more than the median user would have seen their bills increase more than the calculations above.

He also said it was important to take anecdotal evidence with a grain of salt, highlighting one example where he said he checked a customer's public claim their bill had tripled from July to August, only to find that the customer had not paid their July bill and therefore that amount had been added to their August bill.

As water and sewer rates increased, usage in the city went down. July is the city's heaviest water usage month, and in July 2018 customers used 262 million gallons, while using 219 million gallons in July 2019 after the rate increase.

Morgan said some of that was residents conserving water in their own homes. In other cases, some organizations and government entities with large fields and lawns had switched from using potable city water for irrigation to using water rights they held but had not been using.

When customers came in to city hall to complain about the rate increase, Morgan said he and other city staff often sat down with them to analyze their hour-by-hour water usage on the EyeOnWater app, which is free to all customers. He said in many cases, they were able to show the customer how to greatly reduce their irrigation costs in the summer by being more strategic.

Some people didn't realize their sprinklers were running more than once during the night, he said, while others were watering shaded "zones" in their yard for the same amount of time as the areas in direct sunlight needed. One customer hadn't noticed a sprinkler head had been broken so that it fed straight into their crawl space instead of watering their lawn.

"A lot of folks weren't familiar with their automatic sprinkler system," Morgan said. "The EyeOnWater app would show they were running their system the exact same in August when it's 100 degrees as in April when it's cool and rainy."

He urged people to get to know their system and their lawn to avoid such water-wasting mistakes. If people "stress" their lawn a little in the spring, and then slowly turn up their watering over the summer as the heat rises, Morgan said, then the grass will need less water in August because it grew deeper roots in the spring.

"Don't flood your lawn in April," he said.

The EyeOnWater app can also help catch leaks, by alerting people if they have a certain amount of water running 24/7. Morgan, for example, had a spigot that hadn't quite been turned off all the way, and the app notified him that he had an 8 gallon per hour leak somewhere.

"Those add up to hundreds of gallons a month," he said.

Now that the city has a year of bills under the new water rates to work with, customers can sign up for a budget-billing plan. The plan doesn't give a discount on water, but makes it easier for a customer to budget by giving them a flat rate per month to pay, calculated by their average usage over the past 12 months.

For more information about water and sewer rates, customers can call the utility billing department at 541-567-5521, visit their temporary offices at 215 E. Gladys Avenue or visit hermiston.or.us.