

# Oregon Senate votes to make health care a right

By **ANDREW SELSKY**  
Associated Press

SALEM — The Oregon Senate on Thursday, March 18, approved a resolution that would ask voters to decide whether the state is obligated to ensure that every resident has access to affordable health care as a fundamental human right.

The resolution, whose aim is to amend the Oregon Constitution, was approved along party lines, with Democratic senators in favor and Republicans opposed. It next goes to the House in the Democrat-controlled Oregon Legislature.

A similar effort in 2018 was approved by the House, but it died in committee in the Senate. If it had been put on the ballot and approved by voters, it would have

been the first constitutional amendment in any state to create a fundamental right to health care.

“Every Oregonian deserves access to cost-effective and clinically appropriate health care,” said Senate Majority Leader Rob Wagner. “Oregon’s Constitution should reflect that truth.”

If the House passes the bill, voters would be asked to consider amending the state’s 162-year-old Constitution.

Republicans said any promise to ensure all Oregonians are entitled to health care lacks financial backing.

“The bill doesn’t fund any system to deliver on that promise,” Senate Republican Leader Fred Girod said. “If Democrats are serious about giving Oregonians free health care, they should



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File  
**A Life Flight Network air ambulance lands at St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton on May 1, 2020. The Oregon Senate on Thursday, March 18, approved a resolution that would ask voters to decide whether the state is obligated to ensure that every resident has access to affordable health care as a fundamental human right.**

come up with an actual plan.”

The resolution says the

state’s obligation must be balanced against funding public schools and other

essential public services.

Senate Republicans claimed in a statement that the League of Women Voters of Oregon has opposed this measure “because of its obscurity.”

But in a Feb. 15 letter, the League of Women Voters of Oregon said it supports the resolution, and called it “simply an aspirational bill.”

This year, as the coronavirus pandemic persists, “will be pivotal for national and state health care reforms,” League President Rebecca Gladstone and health care specialist Bill Walsh wrote. “It’s time to continue to do our part in this effort by involving voters in the process.”

Asked to explain why Senate Republicans claimed the League has opposed the resolution, caucus spokes-

man Dru Draper pointed out that the League had opposed it in 2018.

A League president — Gladstone’s predecessor — had sent a letter in opposition in 2018, saying the state couldn’t afford “the added cost of health care coverage for all its residents at this time.”

But Gladstone said things are different this time.

“We are pleased to see provisions added to this 2021 bill that will balance health care with the public’s interest in funding schools and other essential public services,” Gladstone said in an email late March 18. “This seems to be a direct response to the League’s work on the 2018 bill, when we advocated for provisions that would protect funding of these essential services.”

## Pessimism pours like rain in Oregon

By **ZANE SPARLING**  
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — A growing share of Oregonians think the state is headed down the wrong track, if not at risk of derailing completely, according to polling data from the Oregon Values and Beliefs Center.

Some 44% of Beaver State residents are pessimistic about Oregon’s future, while only 35% are optimistic and the remaining 21% are unsure. Those results show a flip-flop from summer 2020, when 43% believed the state was headed in the right direction.

“As a whole, the government is infuriating,” Melissa Aspell, one of the poll’s respondents, said in a phone interview. “There’s a lot of frustration with how Gov. (Kate) Brown runs things. And then clean up Portland, for God’s sake.”

Aspell, a 39-year-old Bend resident, said she was concerned about the overgrowth of “cookie-cutter homes” in her neighborhood and the misallocation of government resources, but noted that local parks are well maintained and she has been able to receive a COVID-19 vaccination.

“(Some people) are pretty sure it’s full of nanobots or something, but conspiracy theories aside, I had a considerably bad reaction to the second one,” she said. “But I feel that was something my

body needed to go through.”

Roughly 600 Oregonians, who are part of a professionally maintained polling group, participated in the online survey in January, with participants selected to correspond with state demographics. The poll’s overall margin of error is 4%.

Here are the key findings:

- Democrats (51%) are significantly more positive about the state’s near future, compared with Republicans (23%) and voters who belong to neither party (28%). Conversely, 66% of Republicans had a negative view of Oregon’s future, compared with 29% of Democrats and 48% of independents.

- Just 2% of poll respondents rated Oregon’s economy as excellent, vastly outnumbered by those who scored the state economy as poor (31%) or only fair (47%). Middle income earners (83%) were more likely to downrate the economy than the working class (74%).

- Nearly half of residents (47%) predict Oregon’s economy is getting worse, compared with 11% who see an upturn on the horizon and 36% who foresee it treading water. Women (52%) were more likely to predict tighter wallets than men (43%). The most pessimistic age group was the middle-aged.

- A slim majority (53%) are very or somewhat worried about their personal finances, while 45% are not too worried or not at all

worried. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of those making less than \$50,000 are concerned about the state of their pocketbook, compared with 33% of those bringing in more than \$100,000 yearly.

- When asked about 2021 in general, rather than just Oregon, most residents (59%) are optimists, though (38%) are pessimistic.

Portlander Amy Bradley said the biggest factor in her sunny outlook was the rebalancing of power in Washington, D.C.

“I think the Democrats holding two branches of government is a good thing,” the 51-year-old said. “People are out and spending money. Help is coming, and is coming to those who need it.”

Chris Billington, who lives in the Sylvan area near Beaverton, admitted that mask wearing can be tiresome — and she’s eager for restrictions to lift so she can take a dip in the pool — but said the state’s response to climate change promised economic opportunities.

“There’s a potential for new and different kinds of jobs,” she said. “My biggest concern is the Republican walkout (of the Oregon Legislature), because that’s just disruptive.”

Republicans walked out of the 2019 and 2020 legislative sessions, and briefly walked out again this year. The 2020 walkout ended the session before it really began.

## Stimulus provides \$1.1B for schools

By **EDER CAMPUZANO**  
The Oregonian

SALEM — Oregon’s public schools are in line to receive another \$1.1 billion in federal relief as part of the \$1.9 trillion federal stimulus package President Joe Biden signed earlier this month.

Portland Public Schools, the state’s largest district, will get \$70 million.

Districts won’t immediately have access to those funds, which state officials say they anticipate will be used largely on school expenses to facilitate a return to in-person instruction. That could include offering summer school, emotional wellness services and classroom air quality upgrades.

The billion-plus outlay is the third and largest such infusion Oregon’s public schools have received since the start of the pandemic.

The Oregon Department of Education was awarded about \$122 million in March 2020. Districts used that money primarily on equipment for virtual learning, *The Oregonian* has found.

Another aid package approved by Congress in December 2020 provided Oregon schools \$499 million. Districts are expected to be able to apply for a share of it as early as next week, said Mike Wilfong, Oregon Department of Education director of school finance and facilities.

Once the latest round of aid comes online, Oregon’s public schools will have access to more than \$1.7

billion. The latest pot of money should be available by mid-April.

Districts will have wide latitude in deciding how to use the cash. The federal aid works as a reimbursement, which means the Oregon Department of Education will have the final say in whether a school’s expense qualifies.

Districts can apply for reimbursement until Sept. 30, 2022.

According to the agency’s latest guidelines, schools can use their share of the federal pot to pay for maintenance or repair projects to improve indoor air quality, assessments and activities to address learning loss, summer learning programs and mental health services, among other things.

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