

Legislature lurches into second half of 2021 session

By GARY A. WARNER
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Disease, dysfunction, and deadlines are challenging the Oregon Legislature as it starts the second half of the 2021 session.

Friday, April 9, was the 80th day of the 160 days the Oregon Constitution allows lawmakers to meet this year. The session has been marked so far by shutdowns and slowdowns.

Senate Republicans walked out for the third session in a row, for a day to protest the lock Democrats have on the legislative agenda.

But some GOP senators would receive death threats from gun control opponents for not walking out on a bill to bar concealed weapons in state buildings.

One email had a subject line "SELLOUT" and a chilling one-line message: "You should be shot."

The Oregon State Police is investigating the threats.

All the turmoil has played out against the rollercoaster ride of falling, then rising COVID-19 numbers.

As of Monday, April 12, the House has passed 115 bills since gaveling to order on Jan. 19. It currently has a backup of 122 bills scheduled for a final vote.

"The tension has started earlier," House Speaker Tina Kotek said last week. "I think it is really hard to tell what is happening."

Committees in both chambers are scurrying to slide under the deadline to have legislation approved by committees and sent to the floor of the originating chamber (House or Senate). Otherwise, the mass majority die.

"A number of those bills at the end of the day will not be ready for deadline," Kotek said. "Things are pretty fluid."

What survives will still have a daunting road to the governor's desk due to a basic partisan split on the direction of the session.

Democrats hold a 37-23 supermajority in the House and an 18-11 supermajority in the Senate, with a former GOP senator declaring himself an independent, but voting most of the time with his old party.

Both parties agree the COVID-19 pandemic and 2020 wildfires, along with the



EO Media Group, File

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state budget, are at the top of the agenda.

Republicans say that's enough for the narrowly focused session they want.

"The House is running a crushing number of committees and pushing controversial legislation," House Republican Leader Christin Drazen, R-Canby, said early in the session.

Democrats say they have large majorities because voters want more: affordable housing, health care, environmental safeguards, police reform, social equity, gun control and more.

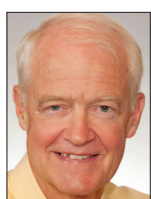
"Votes matter," Kotek has said of Republican opposition.

Whatever the outcome, the Legislature has 75 days as of Wednesday, April 14 — weekends included — left on its calendar. After June 28, lawmakers are required to adjourn, no matter what. Then go home and enjoy summer.

But be ready to come back in the autumn.

That caveat arose on April 9 when the Oregon Supreme Court ruled the Legislature would draw the increasingly overdue legislative district maps to be used for the 2022 election. COVID-19 is delaying U.S. Census data used for the once-a-decade redistricting by up to six months.

The court said the Legislature could return in a special



Courtney



Drazen



Girod



Kotek

session later this year to do the mapmaking. No dates are set, yet. But the window to draw maps that would be used until 2032 will be weeks instead of months. It will limit the chance for public comment and may force lawmakers to use possibly iffy data that could attract lawsuits.

For now, that is a future

fight. There's an overflowing plate of problems right now.

Democrats have enough votes to pass any legislation without Republican votes.

While unable to defeat bills, Republicans can slow or stall all lawmaking.

Senate Republicans held a one-day walkout early in the session to remind Democrats that they ignored GOP input

at their peril. Republicans in both chambers departed Salem in 2020, killing the session with hundreds of bills awaiting action.

Drazen has opted instead to use parliamentary rules to require bills be read out loud in their entirety. The glacial process reached its bizarre apex when a computer program with a metallic female monotone voice read a 170-page bill. It took two days to finally vote on mostly technical revisions to the newly designated Oregon Liquor and Cannabis Commission.

Kotek has countered Drazen's slo-mo move by doubling the weekly floor

sessions to include evenings and Saturdays.

Starting on Thursday, April 15, Kotek is having three sessions per day.

The partisan jockeying goes on amid a pandemic that has sickened 170,850 and killed 2,441 in Oregon, as of April 12.

The Oregon Capitol has been closed since March 2020 due to the COVID-19 crisis. The Oregon Health Authority has reported the Salem ZIP code that includes the Capitol has most often recorded the highest number of new infections per week throughout the crisis. Committee meetings can be held virtually, but final votes on bills have to be done on the floor of the two chambers in the Capitol.

Republicans have called for reopening the Capitol, citing Democrats' lengthy agenda and now extended floor debates as evidence that the infection danger is either over-hyped or Kotek in particular is putting politics before lawmakers' health.

Democrats have countered that it is Republicans who are causing undue exposure to infection by insisting on so much dead time in the building while bills are read.

The House has twice shut down for short periods amid reports of a positive test, but has not reported the person infected as a House member.

Gov. Kate Brown stepped in to order a special vaccination clinic on April 7 for any as-yet unvaccinated lawmakers, who qualified as "essential workers" as of March 31. They received the one-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine, the same one Brown was vaccinated with last month.

Unemployment drops to 6%, state adds 20,000 jobs

By MIKE ROGOWAY
The Oregonian

SALEM — Oregon's jobless rate dropped slightly in March, according to new data released on Tuesday, April 13, from the Oregon Employment Department, falling one-tenth of a percentage point to 6%.

Oregon added 20,000 jobs last month. Most of the gains were in the leisure and hospitality sector as bars and restaurants steadily reopened after a broad wintertime shutdown that accompanied a spike in COVID-19 cases.

The state has now regained 54% of the jobs lost in the early days of the pandemic, 153,100 altogether. Oregon's jobless rate is less than half its peak 11 months ago, 13.2%, but it's still well above the historic lows around 3.5% in the months before the pandemic hit.

Oregon's unemployment rate in March matched the national figure. But the state's unemployment rate has barely budged since December 2020.

And more than 9,000 Oregonians filed new jobless claims in each of the past two weeks, the fastest pace of new filings since January.

Permanent layoffs make up a rising share of all job

cuts, indicating that Oregonians losing their jobs now don't expect their employers will ever call them back to work. That could slow the pace of recovery in the months ahead.

Meanwhile, many workers have exhausted their eligibility under prior jobless programs after a year of unemployment. That doesn't necessarily mean the end of benefits payments, but it does require that unemployed workers make a complicated shift to extend their aid.

That's produced a flood of phone calls to the employment department, more than at any point since the early days of Oregon's "stay home" order a year ago. The department's phone lines remain jammed, as they have been for most of the past year, and the agency says it expects to take until the end of the year to unplug the lines.

So for now, the department recommends people with questions about their claims use its online Contact Us form to make inquiries about their benefits.

The form spares laid-off workers the anxiety and frustration of trying to get through the department's exasperating phone system, but 80% of inquiries submitted online take more than a week to resolve.