

Wyden pushing his agenda as election clock ticking

By GARY A. WARNER
Oregon Capital Bureau

EUGENE — As a former college basketball player, Ron Wyden knows all about shot clocks.

In basketball, the clocks hang above the backboard on each side, showing players how much of the 24 seconds remain between taking possession of the ball and trying to score.

Democrats are facing a shot clock now — 14 months and ticking. That's the time of possession remaining of assured Democratic control of The White House, The Senate, and the House before the next election on Nov. 8, 2022.

During a masked and socially distanced interview Monday, Aug. 30, on the patio of a bakery in Eugene, Wyden, the Democratic U.S. senator from Oregon, argued against letting clocks rule Congress.

"I am a contrarian on the idea that you can only do legislation in odd-numbered years because elections are in even-numbered years," Wyden said. "The best politics is to do good policy that helps people."

Wyden is well aware of the tenuous nature of Democrats' majority, a status that includes his moving into the chair of the Senate Finance Committee, where much federal spending flows.

Democrats came out of the 2020 elections with a fragile trifecta of government control.

Joe Biden won the presidency over incumbent Donald Trump. In the House, Democrats hold a slender 220-212 edge, with three vacancies. A surprising sweep of both Senate seats in Georgia propelled the party to a 50-50 tie with Republicans in the Senate. Biden's victory meant his running mate, Vice-President Kamala Harris, can cast a tie-breaking vote in many cases in her role as President of the Senate.

History shows the party of a new president loses seats — often dozens — in the House in the first midterm election. All 435 seats — including a new sixth one in Oregon — will be on the 2022 ballot. Only twice has the new party held or added to its majority: Democrats in 1934 amid the Depression and Republicans in 2002 after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The Senate, with its staggered six-year terms, is harder to predict, but overall history



Bryce Dole/East Oregonian, File

Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden, center, meets with local officials Saturday, May 29, 2021, from across Umatilla County at the Umatilla County Courthouse in Pendleton.

favors a turnover to the GOP.

In the 40 years since he arrived in Washington as a 31-year-old freshman congressman from Portland, Wyden has learned that over time, you'll likely be on legislative offense with the majority or defense with the minority.

When he arrived in Washington in 1981, Republicans were on the rise. Ronald Reagan had just been elected president in a landslide, while Oregon's governor and two senators were both Republicans.

Today, Democrat Biden is in the White House and Democrats hold tenuous control of both the U.S. Senate and House. In Oregon today, the governor and both Senators — along with four of five U.S. House members — are Democrats.

In his 25 years in the Senate, Wyden has spent most of the time outside looking in — with 10 years in the majority and 15 in the minority. In the House, he was in the majority 14 out of 15 years. But the basic math remains the same.

Regardless of the partisan breakdown of membership, the most important number doesn't change in the 100-member Senate.

"You need 51 votes," Wyden said.

That coalition can be put together in different ways. He's co-sponsoring legislation with U.S. Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, on mental health care reform. Crapo was chair of the Finance Committee when the GOP held the Senate until early January. He's worked with Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, over the years.

But he also is ready, when needed, to push legislation through the tight partisan squeeze, as he

did early this year when he guided President Biden's \$1.3 trillion coronavirus relief package through the Finance Committee and onto the floor for passage on a party-line 50-49 vote.

He's taking his legislative shots at a rapid-fire pace. On Aug. 31, he held a virtual town hall to promote a bill he co-sponsored, The River Democracy Act, which would designate about 4,700 miles of Wild and Scenic Rivers given additional federal protection.

He's been in Central Oregon to tout the state's portion of the \$1 trillion infrastructure bill passed by the U.S. Senate Aug. 10. The bill would pump billions of dollars into Oregon highways, water, electrical, internet access, and educational projects, as well as fund more aggressive action against drought and wildfire. It's now awaiting action in the House.

Wyden has introduced legislation to protect domestic abuse victims from future intimidation by gun violence, and fund affordable housing rent vouchers.

A bill would streamline federal drug laws so that legal marijuana businesses could have access to banking and credit. Other issues include making court records free of charge, pushing for insurance companies to pay for fans and air-conditioners under a federal Medicaid program, and allowing tax credits to sustain local newspapers.

Wyden plans to keep going as long as there is a window to get laws passed.

"My big three priorities now are child care, affordable housing, and

prescription drug prices," Wyden said.

They are part of what he termed the "human infrastructure" support that he says is just as important as concrete for highways or stronger wire for electricity.

Republicans were wrong about the aid package proposed by President Biden because the math facing Oregon residents is not just about a paycheck, Wyden said. Part of the decision of whether to take a job is the ability to have affordable child care while you are working and to be able to afford to rent or even buy a home for your family. He believes too much money is spent on a dizzying array of prescription drug programs and prices that always put the consumer at the disadvantage.

"The top of the one percent have to pay their fair share," Wyden said. "You ask people if the wealthiest are paying their fair share, they are going to say no."

Though it's been just over seven months since the new Congress was convened, the window to file to run for the 2022 election is already opening — it's Sept. 9 in Oregon. Wyden said he will be on the ballot, seeking a fifth full term. Prineville Mayor Jason Beebe is among the candidates who've said they plan to file to run against Wyden.

It's a seemingly uphill task to topple Wyden, who has never received less than 55% of the vote in his U.S. Senate races. But he also recalled when he was elected to the U.S. Senate in a 1996 special election, no Democrat had won a Senate seat in Oregon since 1962.

"Voters get the last word," he said.

Adrian School Board fires superintendent

By LILIANA FRANKEL
Malheur Enterprise

ADRIAN — Kevin Purnell was fired Monday, Aug. 30, as superintendent of the Adrian School District just one week after students returned to school.

The Adrian School Board, convening in a special meeting, voted 4-1 to terminate Purnell after meeting in executive, or closed door, session for less than half an hour to consider the matter.

The board provided no public explanation for its surprise decision to oust a superintendent who has been on the job for three years and in the district for 14 years.

Board Chair Eddie Kincade said after the meeting the decision was because of Purnell's failure to follow board directives. He declined to elaborate.

Kincade and board members Bobby Davis, Ryan Martin, and Quinten Shenk voted for the motion to terminate Purnell while Eric White opposed it. They took the vote without comment.

After the board emerged from executive session and had its vote, Purnell gave an emotional speech to an emotional crowd.

He said he had at times failed to communicate well, and board members had at times failed to communicate in a civil manner.

"Ultimately, I feel that I have lost my way, and it began to consume me," Purnell said. "I have become tired. Tired of disappointing myself, my family, my friends, my colleagues."

The conflicts Kincade and Purnell alluded to emerged amid rising COVID cases in Malheur County and continued opposition to government-mandated mask-wearing in Adrian. Purnell has said he is not in favor of Gov. Kate Brown's mandates, but he was described in comments by Adrian residents as a "rule follower" who would enforce them anyway.

No one has yet been named interim superintendent.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Default: Failure to fulfill an obligation, especially the obligation to make payments on a loan.

Encumbrance: A right to interest in, or legal liability attached to a property that may lessen its value, such as a lien, lease or easement.

Foreclosure: The legal process of terminating an owner's interest in property and forcing a sale, usually as the result of a default under a mortgage.

Lien: A legal claim asserted over a property, usually to secure payment for a debt or obligation.

Mortgage: A legal agreement that conveys the conditional right of ownership on an asset or property that its owner to a lender as security for a loan.

Probate: The legal process that resolves a deceased person's debts so the executor or personal representative can distribute assets in an estate according to a will.

Trustee: a holder of property on behalf of a beneficiary.

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