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Blue Mountain Community College in Pendleton also operates several extension campuses in Northeastern Oregon. Democrats in the Legislature sent letters to the state's U.S. congressional delegation Monday, Nov. 1, 2021, urging them and the Biden administration to revisit a plan for free community college.

Oregon Democrats push delegation in D.C. to restore free community college

By MEERAH POWELL
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — Democrats in the Oregon Legislature sent letters to the state's U.S. congressional delegation Monday, Nov. 1, urging them and the Biden administration to revisit a plan for free community college.

President Joe Biden originally included two years of free community college in his "Build Back Better Plan," but removed it from the spending framework last week. Democratic leaders on Capitol Hill worked to scale back what had previously been a \$3.5 trillion package last week to satisfy concerns from moderates in their party, particularly Sen. Joe Manchin, D-West Virginia,

and Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, D-Arizona.

The state lawmakers in Oregon are hoping Biden and other Democratic leaders will reconsider the policy in the near future.

"By not investing in two years of free community college, this threatens Oregon's and the United States' ability to develop and retain a workforce that meets today's evolving industry needs," the state Democrats who authored the letter wrote.

They wrote that two years of free community college would help lift millions of Americans economically, especially those from underserved communities such as people of color and people with low incomes.

Tentative opinion suggests Oregon's congressional map could be upheld

By DIRK VANDERHART
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — New congressional districts passed by Oregon Democrats meet all legal criteria, with little evidence they amount to blatant partisan gerrymandering, a judge has found.

That tentative opinion, released Monday, Nov. 1, by retired state Judge Henry Breithaupt, is not the final word in an ongoing lawsuit, in which Republicans are seeking to have the new six-district congressional map redrawn. Instead, Breithaupt is acting as a "special master" in the case, tasked with making findings of fact for a five-judge panel that will decide the outcome.

But the findings by Breithaupt suggest Republicans have failed to prove their insistence that Democrats purposefully stacked the congressional maps in their own favor. A lawsuit filed on behalf of former Secretary of State Bev Clarno and three other former Republican elected officials called the map "a clear, egregious partisan gerrymander, as has been widely acknowledged both in Oregon and across the country."

Skeptical testimony

After nearly 15 hours of hearings last week, Breithaupt was not convinced. His opinion relies heavily on a proposed set of facts suggested by the Oregon Department of Justice, which is representing the Legislature in defending the map.

Breithaupt agreed with the state's contention that the new maps meet statutory criteria requiring them to be of roughly equal populations and contiguous, and to use existing transportation, political and geographic boundaries. The judge also agreed that an additional factor that must be considered — that lawmakers cannot unduly split communities of common interest — was difficult to determine.

Most damaging to the Republican



Brian Hayes/The Associated Press, File

Sen. Sara Gelsler, D-Linn County, talks to Sen. Lew Frederick, D-Portland, during the legislative session in the Senate on June 23, 2021, at the Oregon State Capitol in Salem.

case, Breithaupt was skeptical of the lone expert the petitioners brought in to testify the new congressional maps were baldly partisan. He found three experts brought in by the state and a national Democratic group helping defend the maps more credible.

Those experts were Paul Gronke, a political science professor at Reed College; Devin Caughey, a political science professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; and Jonathan Katz, a social sciences professor at the California Institute of Technology.

The three men testified to different measurements of potential bias on the congressional map. Some of those benefited Democrats, including an often-used metric called the "efficiency gap." That measure attempts to quantify which party has the most wasted votes under a plan — either by voting for a candidate who did not win, or by voting for a winning candidate by more than the margin needed for victory.

But other metrics could benefit Republicans, and each of the professors called to defend the maps suggested the congressional plan would not necessarily give Democrats five of the state's six seats in the U.S. House, as Republicans argue.

One caveat offered by many experts: Because Oregon only has six congressional districts, statistical analysis includes high amounts of uncertainty.

"I agree with Dr. Caughey's conclusion that '[t]here is, in short, little compelling evidence that the Oregon districting plan substantially favors the Democratic Party,'" Breithaupt's opinion read in part.

Breithaupt was less impressed with Thomas Brunell, a political science professor at the University of Texas at Dallas.

Called by the Republican petitioners in the case, Brunell introduced an analysis that suggested the map was far more biased in Democrats' favor than the other witnesses. The state countered that Brunell had based that analysis on the 2012, 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, which did not fairly characterize voting patterns for congressional elections, and that his methods would not be accepted by most in the political science realm.

Breithaupt agreed.

"While I find Dr. Brunell generally to be a credible witness, the methodology he employs, and therefore the conclusions he reached, lack credibility and are therefore unreliable," he wrote.

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