

State of the state: Brown sees positives amid turmoil

By LAUREN DRAKE
Oregon Public Broadcasting

avoid an epic and expensive battle over Oregon's forests.

The governor's other high points:

- Graduation rates have increased for kids by 8% since she took office, and there has been a record investment in schools.

- The number of children in foster care has decreased by 11% to about 5,000 kids, the lowest number in 16 years.

- The state's largest transportation package was passed.

- The state passed a comprehensive reproductive health package.

And while COVID-19 has hit every state hard, Oregon is the third in the nation for lowest cumulative case counts, the governor said. The governor has come under fire for having some of the strictest COVID-19 restrictions.

This legislative session, the governor plans to push for a \$200 million package to bolster the state's workforce, particularly in health care, tech and manufacturing and construction.

"We must do more than give people particular job skills ... We need to help Oregonians create a career ladder. We need to take an entry-level job, like a certified nursing assistant, and provide the skills to advance to careers in para-

medicine, nursing or health care administration. That's turning a job into a career," she said.

The investment will be targeted at those who have been particularly hard hit by the pandemic.

"The families who have faced discrimination and barriers to economic opportunity for generations simply due to who they are, where they live or the color of their skin," she said.

The governor noted that to get people back to work, they need stable housing and child care.

She is also pushing for a \$400 million investment in



Kristyna Wentz-Graff/Oregon Public Broadcasting

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown, in her office at the state Capitol following her final state of the state address Thursday, Feb. 3, 2022. Brown acknowledged the turmoil the state has faced during the pandemic as well as noting Oregon's economy is strong and unemployment is low.

affordable housing and \$100 million investment in child care.

"Child care is a basic necessity; it is just as critical to our economic recovery as infrastructure," Brown said. "For working parents, child care is infrastructure."

The governor spoke of the skyrocketing prices of homes in Portland and the housing crisis that is evident across the state from Coos Bay to Ontario. She spoke of the million-dollar condos being built on the same city blocks where people are sleeping in tents, huddling over fires to stay warm. There are more than

15,000 Oregonians who are believed not to have homes.

With the state's budget doing well, it's a chance to address the entrenched issue that has been decades in the making, she said.

"There's an old saying in politics: Don't tell me what your values are. Show me your budget, and I'll tell you what your values are."

But, Brown said, it's not just about investing resources.

"It's about fixing a system that has been rigged against working families, particularly families of color. We must keep our eyes fixed on the deep racial disparities in housing stability and homeownership caused by decades, centuries of racism in housing policies in this country."

Finally, the governor addressed climate change.

"Every year I have been governor, we have seen more extreme weather than the last. We have experienced unprecedented devastation, from historic drought to expansive flooding to a deadly heat dome and massive power outages from winter storms," Brown said, adding Oregon needs to transition to low carbon energy sources.

Former House Republican Leader Christine Drazen, who is now running for governor, offered a

contrasting viewpoint on Brown's time in office.

"Brown's failed policies have left Oregonians paying billions more in taxes, undermined public safety, and cheapened the value of an Oregon diploma," Drazen said in a written statement. "Her top-down approach to responding to the pandemic has been a disaster for Oregon families and employers, yet she continues to double down. ... Oregonians desperately need new leadership."

And Senate Republican Leader Tim Knopp, R-Bend, noted the governor's speech didn't speak to public safety issues.

"Crime is at record levels here in Oregon, but you wouldn't know that by listening to the governor's speech," Knopp said in a statement. "People don't feel safe and Republicans share their frustration and anger. The lack of urgency Democrats have brought to this crisis is shocking. The governor's workforce package won't do anything for our economy if people don't feel safe to work or do business here."

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Oregon bridges continue to age

By PETER WONG
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — The latest report about bridge conditions on state highways offers bad and good news for Oregon motorists and truck drivers.

The good news: The Oregon Department of Transportation is making progress in seismic reinforcement of state bridges, and work is scheduled to start later this year on the George Abernethy Bridge, built in 1970, which carries Interstate 205 across the Willamette River between West Linn and Oregon City. The work will eventually cover nine bridges in a seven-mile stretch of Interstate 205 between Stafford Road and state Highway 213 in Oregon City.

The bad news in the 2021 report ODOT released last month: The percentage of Oregon bridges deemed to be in "good condition" continues to fall, from 40% two decades ago, to 24% in 2021. While Oregon has relatively few state bridges in poor condition, the report also says ODOT is hovering at the edge of the 78% goal it set for bridges maintained in fair condition, and that percentage has been dropping for the past five years.

Time is working against state bridges, more than half of which were built before 1970, during the interstate highway era. A bridge has a normal lifespan of 50 years, although its usefulness can be extended.

Under a 2017 state transportation financing law, \$12 million is generated annually for bridge repairs, up from \$10 million back in 2018. The

recent federal infrastructure financing law, which President Joe Biden signed on Nov. 15, will yield a total of \$268 million more earmarked for bridge repairs over the next five or six years. The federal law also offers opportunities for states to seek competitive grants for bridge work.

Still, at the rate of three bridges annually, it will take 900 years to replace the 2,750 bridges in the state system. ODOT estimates its bridge maintenance backlog at \$5 billion.

Robert Van Brocklin of Portland, chairman of the Oregon Transportation Commission, said the new federal funding helps with bridges and other transportation needs — but it is not enough.

"We can make progress on many of our goals, but we cannot solve the vast majority of our funding problems with the money from this legislation," he said in a statement after a commission meeting Jan. 20. "We also need to pursue other revenue sources to produce sustainable transportation funding to invest in a reliable, diverse transportation system."

The bridge problem is not new. After state highway officials posted load limits on some bridges on Interstate 5 — Oregon's main north-south corridor — the 2003 Legislature approved a \$2.5-billion financing plan, \$1.6 billion of which went to fixing state and local bridges on key freight routes.

In addition to I-5 and I-84, Oregon's main east-west route, ODOT identified these highways as Fix-It priority routes a decade ago: U.S. Highway 97 through Central Oregon; U.S. Highway 20 between Bend and Burns, U.S. Highway 26 between Portland and the north coast, state Highway 18 from the Portland area to the coast; parts of U.S. Highway 101 on the coast, and state Highway 58 from south of Eugene to Highway 97.

But the report says important bridges, such as the Columbia Slough Bridge that offers access to the industrial area on Marine Drive in Portland, are left out because they are not on state highways and not on priority routes. Built in 1933, the main span of that bridge has steel girders supported by a concrete foundation, but 11 other spans are timber.

Unlike pavement conditions on highways, there are few alternatives for poor conditions on bridges, other than load limits or long detours.

As for seismic reinforcement, the ODOT report says that work has been done on the northern half of vulnerable bridges on Highway 97 — a north-south route that cuts through Central Oregon — and construction will start on bridges in the southern half.

Of four seismic projects in Southern Oregon, one is complete, one is under construction, and two are in design.

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