

Draft ODOT reform plan released in wake of review

By Paris Achen
Capital Bureau

SALEM — The state's administrative agency has laid out a draft plan for reforming weaknesses at the Oregon Department of Transportation, but deadlines for the reforms lag behind legislators' schedule for approving a transportation package.

The draft recommendations by the Department of Administrative Services are based on the findings of an independent consultant's management review of the agency, finalized Feb. 1.

The state paid New York-based McKinsey & Co. \$1 million to evaluate the performance of ODOT before lawmakers consider approving hundreds of millions of dollars in new transportation funding later this session. The revenue to pay for projects would likely come largely from a hike in the state's gas tax and registration fees.

Gov. Kate Brown ordered the review to help allay some lawmakers' concerns the agency wasn't prepared to handle the new projects efficiently and effectively.

The consultants concluded there is an unclear governance structure for ODOT and the Oregon Transportation Commission, which sets policy for the agency. The agency also lacks a strategic vision for the future and accountability measures, the consultants found.



Capital Bureau

The Department of Administrative Services has released draft recommendations to reform the Department of Transportation based on the results of a consultant's evaluation.

In its draft, DAS recommended that the governor and Legislature convene a work group to clarify the governance structure and report back Nov. 1.

ODOT should seek the expertise of a management consulting company to develop a management plan for the agency that would define structure, roles and measurements for success.

The agency also should seek out a consulting company to address waste in its fleet and facilities programs and convene procurement experts from other state agencies to review potential improvements for contracting.

Other recommendations ask for a communications plan, align legislative standards with the realities of the agency's operations and ask the secretary of state to conduct an audit specifically on ODOT's management

of funds in the highway program.

Finally, DAS recommends conducting another management review to identify the progress of any changes.

The draft recommendations by DAS were released to the Pamplin Media Group/EO Media Group Friday, March 24, in response to a public records request.

The finalized recommendations are scheduled to be released next week, March 27-31, said DAS spokesman Matt Shelby. The records were submitted to the OTC and ODOT earlier this month. The commission and agency have been asked to give feedback on the recommendations by Monday, March 27, Shelby said.

The first of several work products recommended in the draft plan wouldn't be due until Nov. 1, months after the state Legislature is scheduled

to adjourn.

Lawmakers on a legislative committee crafting the transportation package say they plan to move forward with their own ODOT reforms. The co-chairs of the Committee on Transportation Preservation and Modernization formed an accountability subgroup to look at such issues.

"When we decided to go with the accountability group, we kind of put aside what the executive department was doing and said, we are going to do what we think needs to be done from a legislative perspective for accountability and transparency," said committee Co-Chairman Sen. Lee Beyer, D-Springfield.

Rep. Alan Olson, R-Albany, who heads the accountability subgroup, said he would consider the draft plan in a separate set of recommendations he plans to present to the full, 14-member transportation package committee April 3.

His recommendations are likely going to include suggestions for changing or clarifying ODOT's governance structure and other accountability measures.

Olson said he is particularly interested in an idea to provide a website to the public where they can track the progress of transportation packages and whether the projects are on schedule and on budget.

Advocates and legislators seek more money for veteran services

By Claire Withycombe
Capital Bureau

SALEM — Oregon veterans' groups have been up in arms since the governor's budget reduced allocations to the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs from the state's general fund and backfilled it with most of the lottery fund dollars set aside for veterans' services by a voter-approved ballot measure.

Now they've brought their concerns to a Legislature busy trying to fill a \$1.6 billion shortfall.

Ballot Measure 96 amended the state's constitution to allocate 1.5 percent of state lottery net proceeds to direct services for veterans.

Advocates have been vocal about what they say is a need for more support — such as for veterans' services officers, who help returned veterans sign up for federal benefits.

Byron Whipple, a veterans' services officer in Union County, told legislators last month that in his area of northeastern Oregon, veterans face problems accessing travel to get medical

care.

In February, community members housed a 75-year-old veteran with dementia for five days because local agencies could not arrange services for him sooner, Whipple wrote in testimony to the Ways and Means Subcommittee on Transportation and Economic Development.

"We do not have local missions and shelters that certain cities and counties have," Whipple wrote. "We do not have the extra tax dollars to fund these emergencies. Last November, we did have hope."

In December, Gov. Kate Brown released a budget that decreased the amount of general fund dollars for veterans' services from \$10 million to \$2 million, provoking the ire of veterans' advocates, who said that the ballot measure was intended to supplement, not supplant, current state funding for veterans.

The Governor's Office said in a statement this week that at \$19.8 million, the governor's budget reflected the intent of Measure 96 by increasing the overall budget for the Oregon

Department of Veterans' Affairs.

Although \$19.8 million would be a near doubling of funding for veterans' services in the next budget cycle, veterans groups say it's not enough, and that the governor's plan may meet the letter, but not the spirit, of Measure 96.

The co-chairs of the Joint Ways and Means Committee, the legislative budget-writing committee, proposed \$23.5 million in combined lottery and general funds for veterans' services as part of their preliminary spending framework in January. Some legislators have called for boosting the amount higher still.

State Rep. Paul Evans, D-Monmouth, is one of them.

Evans acknowledged in a statement Thursday that state legislators were facing an "extraordinarily difficult budget environment."

"Now we have to find a way to increase funding to a level where we can do some real good for the men and women we've sent into harm's way, while also strengthening our schools, providing quality

health care and investing in other critical services," Evans said.

Freshman Rep. Ron Noble, R-McMinnville, wants to bump the amount of money the veterans' services program gets by amending the agency's funding bill, bringing the total to about \$30 million for veterans' services.

Noble says he wants to obey the will of the voters. According to the Oregon Secretary of State's Office, 83 percent of Oregon voters voted in favor of Measure 96.

However, according to the nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Office, the measure did not require that the amount of money allocated to veterans' services in the general fund be maintained.

"There's nothing in the bill that says you cannot supplant the dollars," Noble said. "But I think that's, I'm going to be blunt, I think that's just a chicken way out."

Noble did not have specific proposals Thursday as to where he'd cut back elsewhere in the state's general fund to increase veterans' services.

Businesses: Paid family leave adds to fatigue of Legislature-imposed mandates

By Pais Achen
Capital Bureau

SALEM — A bill to require 12 weeks of paid family and medical leave would bring Oregon up to the living standards of most other developed nations but represents another financial setback to the state's business community, said speakers at a hearing Thursday, March 23, at the Capitol.

The hearing in front of the House Committee on Early Childhood and Family Supports drew a standing room-only crowd with attendees watching from an overflow room and in the hallway.

"It is beyond time for Oregon and the U.S. to join the rest of the world," said Diane Solomon, a psychiatric nurse practitioner with the Oregon Nurses Association.

While many businesses support and offer family and medical leave, the bill is overreaching," said Betsy Earls of

Associated Oregon Industries.

The legislation "creates conditions that would make it costly and difficult for businesses — especially small ones — to plan and manage their operations," Earls said.

The bill, sponsored by four House Democrats, would require a mandatory ½ percent deduction from employees' pay. Employers would be required to contribute an equal amount. The money would go to a paid leave insurance program administered by the Oregon Department of Business and Consumer Services.

Employees who have been on the job for at least 90 days would be eligible to use a portion of the benefit; after 12 months, they would be eligible for up to 12 weeks of paid leave for illness or a family member's illness. Employees could take up to 18 months of parental leave for a new baby, adoption or foster care child placement and receive at least 90 percent

of their regular wages or salary.

Four states — California, New Jersey, Rhode Island and New York — have developed some type of paid family leave program. Paid leave for new parents is available for 16 weeks in France, 15 weeks in Canada, a full year in Germany and 15 weeks in Japan, Solomon noted.

About 14 percent of workers across the nation have access to paid family and medical leave at work, according to the Time for Oregon Coalition, which supports the bill.

Federal and Oregon law provide up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave for some workers — however, these laws don't apply to everyone and don't provide lost income.

Some family members are excluded by workplace and economic policies that fail to recognize the nearly 80 percent of American families that don't fit the nuclear family model of a married mother and father and

their biologically related children, said Rose King, a coalition spokeswoman.

Proponents cite research that shows women who are forced to go back to work too soon after having a baby are predisposed to postpartum depression. Meanwhile, babies benefit from receiving care from their parents during the first 12 weeks of life, said Dr. Evan Shereck, a pediatrician at Portland's Oregon Health Science University.

"This is a time when children are at their most vulnerable and it is critical to have a caregiver with them 24 hours a day. Unfortunately, not everyone has the option to stay home and care for their new baby," Shereck said.

Opponents said the requirement would add to a mounting burden of new laws squeezing money out of businesses, including mandatory paid sick leave and increases in the minimum wage.

LEGAL NOTICE

NOTICE OF MEETING

A public meeting of the Wallowa County Compensation Committee will be held on APRIL 6, 2017. The meeting will be held in the Thornton Conference Room of the Wallowa County Courthouse at 2:00pm. The purpose of the meeting is to make recommendations on elected official compensation to the Wallowa County Commission.

LEGAL NOTICE

NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING

Pursuant to ORS 477.250, notice is hereby given that a public hearing will be held at the Northeast Oregon Forest Protection (NEO) District Office, 611 20th Street, La Grande, Oregon, on April 17, 2017, at 9:00 am, to receive from any interested persons suggestions, advice, objections or remonstrance's to the proposed budget for the forest protection district. A copy of the tentative budget for the Forest Protection District may be inspected during normal working hours. To ensure the broadest range of services to individuals with disabilities, persons with disabilities requiring special arrangements should contact Millie Miller, at 541-963-3168 at least two working days in advance of the scheduled hearing.

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