

Oregon News

OREGON LEGISLATURE

Bend Republican a key figure in debate over vaccination bill

By Gary A. Warner
WesCom News Service

SALEM — Cheri Helt is on the hot seat.

On Monday, the Republican representative from Bend will stand on the House floor as a chief advocate for a bill ending nonmedical exemptions for vaccinations required before children can attend school.

While backed by an overwhelming majority of the medical community, House Bill 3063 has drawn waves of public opponents to the Capitol and virulent opposition from many Republican lawmakers.

“I’ve become more accustomed to confrontation,” Helt said in an interview Thursday.

Since arriving in Salem in January, Helt has found herself a rare species in the Legislature: a moderate Republican.

Helt has voted with Republicans against statewide rent control and diverting part of the “kicker” tax rebate.

Though a member of the Joint Committee on Student Success, she voted against the panel’s \$2 billion funding package, saying it hurt small business.

But Helt has voted with Democrats to support state taxes for Medicaid, a plastic bag ban and a gun control bill targeting domestic abusers and stalkers.

“I think of it as voting for good public policy rather than polarized politics,” Helt said.

But it is the vaccination bill that has turned Helt into a political lightning rod.

Early in the session, Helt signed on as a chief co-sponsor, one of two Republicans among 13 lawmakers who put their name on the bill.

Advocates pointed to the reappearance of measles, 19 years after federal health officials had announced in 2000 that it had been eradicated.

“I believe in science, the safety of our children and in sensible, fact-based public policy,” Helt said when the bill was introduced in February.

The legislation to remove philosophical, personal and religious exemptions for vaccines is backed by Democratic leaders in the Legislature. Gov. Kate Brown has promised to sign the bill into law.

The legislation galvanized Oregon anti-vaccination activists, who turned out in droves for legislative hearings, organized statewide marches March 30 and held a rally at the Capitol on April 23. Lawmakers received a tsunami of calls, emails and visits to their Capitol and district offices.

Helt said she knew there would be vocal opposition, but the volume of activity has been a surprise.

“I didn’t think this was a light issue, but it has been

House passes bill ending nonmedical exemption for vaccinating students

SALEM— A week after public health officials declared a measles outbreak in the Pacific Northwest over, the Oregon House approved tightening the state’s vaccine laws and limiting a parent’s ability to opt-out of school vaccine requirements.

Oregon currently has one of the nation’s most relaxed vaccination laws and is one of 17 states to allow parents to exempt their children from vaccinations for philosophical, personal and religious reasons. Lawmakers voted 35-25 Monday to substantially limit exemptions, only allowing families to opt-out for medical reasons.

Parents sat in the Capitol’s upper gallery during the floor vote wearing black to “kill the bill,” and the crowd would give a collective thumbs down to legislators who spoke in favor of tougher vaccine requirements.

Upon learning the final vote count, parents loudly hissed and then quickly exited the building, many in tears.

While many lawmakers struggled to toe the line between individual freedom and public health, that wasn’t an issue for Rep. Mitch Greenlick, the Democrat from Portland behind the bill.

“This debate is not about the role of government,” he said. “It’s about whether children live or die. If we don’t believe that we just need to look back at the historical experience of these kind of preventable diseases.”

This year has been the worst for U.S. measles count in over two decades. At least 77 people were diagnosed in an outbreak in Washington and Oregon. Although public health officials declared that outbreak to be over last week, other outbreaks have been popping up across the country including in New York City. Nearly all of those infected so far were unvaccinated.

More and more parents are choosing to opt out of vaccinations, citing worries over vaccine safety that health professionals say are unfounded. Oregon now has the highest non-medical kindergarten exemption rate in the country at 7.6%.

Families could only claim medical exemptions to vaccines under the Oregon proposal. Unvaccinated children would still be able to attend online and home school, but they could not go to in-person school-related activities. Lawmakers amended the bill to make it easier for parents to seek medical exemptions.

The measure now goes to the Senate, and Gov. Kate Brown previously said she’d sign the bill. If passed, Oregon would join California, Mississippi and West Virginia in only allowing medical exemptions.

— Sarah Zimmerman, Associated Press



Submitted photo
Rep. Cheri Helt, R-Bend, speaks on the floor of the Oregon House during the 2019 legislative session.

nents regularly over months of debate. She says she has taken some of their concerns to heart — such as amending the bill to put off the mandatory requirement for a year.

“I think it is really important that I listen and that I made myself available,” Helt said. “I think that has shown through in the legislative process. Amendments have been made to the bill a number of times. It’s a better bill because of those amendments.”

With the 2020 Oregon primary just slightly over a year away, anti-vaccine activists have promised that lawmakers supporting the bill will pay a political price at the polls next year. Helt has said she will run for reelection.

Regardless of the vaccination bill, Helt could attract opponents in the primary and general elections.

Helt has said she has not made a decision on how to vote on controversial legislation such as the carbon pollution program and a sweeping gun control bill. She says she will wait until the final bills come to the House.

If Helt wins the primary, she can expect a push by Democrats to win a seat where they have a 6,500 voter registration advantage over Republicans.

Helt says she’s very aware of the buffeting on her right and left but says it comes with the job.

“Representing a swing district is much different than a regular seat that usually votes for one party,” Helt said.

While no one will be happy with all of her votes, Helt said, representing Bend makes it easier to vote her conscience.

“I’m not looking through a partisan lens,” she said. “I’m not looking at how a vote might help my reelection.”

Teachers plan walkout over school budgets

By Sarah Zimmerman
Associated Press

SALEM — Tens of thousands of teachers are expected to walk out across Oregon this week, adding to the string of nationwide protests over class sizes and education funding.

Schools around the state, including Oregon’s largest district, Portland Public Schools, will close for at least part of Wednesday as educators press for more money from lawmakers. Some schools will stay open, as teachers opt for sit-ins or after-school rallies. Most schools participating in the walkout will still have staff on hand to administer national Advanced Placement testing or provide food and care to low-income students.

Oregon schools have some of the highest class sizes and lowest graduation rates in the United States. Districts have just one librarian, or none at all, fewer than the recommended number of counselors and been forced to cut programs like physical education and music.

“Our educators have been trying their hardest to cover up for our funding losses and try to do more with less,” said John Larson, president of the Oregon Education Association. “We are to a point now that we can’t do that anymore. We want to show that Oregon isn’t immune to the problems we see in other walkouts throughout the country.”

The action follows a wave of teacher activism that began in West Virginia in 2018 and was followed by Oklahoma, Kentucky and Arizona. Teachers in North Carolina and South Carolina rallied at their respective state capitols last week seeking more money.

But unlike other states, Oregon teachers want to make it clear they’re not pushing for pay raises or other union demands. They say they’re walking out to highlight the conditions inside the classroom and how years of lower funding has affected children’s learning opportunities.

“This has nothing to do with bargaining and everything to do with providing for our kids,” said Imelda Cortez, a fifth-grade teacher at Howard Elementary School in Eugene. “The conditions have gotten so difficult that we haven’t been able to meet their needs. It’s sad to admit as a teacher, but these kids deserve a better education than what they’re currently receiving.”

Cortez attended the same elementary school where she’s now been a teacher for the past 15 years. She watched as the education she received as a child slowly disappeared: Class sizes swelled from 17 to 32 kids, and a lack of funding meant fewer nurses and librarians in addition to cutting extracurricular activities.

Teachers also say they’re unequipped to handle the complex behavioral problems increasingly exhibited by their students. Oregon has half the nationally recommended amount of school counselors at a time when 17% of eighth-graders say they have contemplated suicide in the past year, according to the Oregon Health Authority.

The state’s school funding problem can be traced to the 1990s, when voters passed two ballot measures to limit property taxes. Suddenly, the state — not school districts — had primary authority over funding schools.

Lawmakers were never able to keep up with the rising costs of educating students and underfunded schools by as much as 38% of recommended levels in 2011, according to the state’s Quality Education Commission.

The Legislature this year is poised to pass a \$1 billion per year funding package for schools to use to boost academic performance and expand mental health services.

The House sent the proposal to the Senate last week, but the measure, which relies on a minimal tax on Oregon’s wealthiest businesses, will likely be sent to the voters to decide.

“Our current school funding formula simply isn’t enough to fund schools,” said Barbara Smith Warner, the Portland Democrat behind the measure.

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