Republicans leave Salem to avoid vote on tax bill

By Sarah Zimmerman
Associated Press

SALEM — Republicans in the Oregon Senate were a no show for a $1 billion education tax vote, bringing the chamber to a halt the day before teachers across the state were to stage a walkout to protest funding levels for schools.

All 12 Republicans were missing Tuesday, denying the Senate a quorum. That means there weren't enough people to formally move ahead with a vote.

"We cannot go on, we cannot do today's agenda regretfully," said Senate President Peter Courtney. "Hopefully tomorrow is a better day."

Oregon schools are unusually dependent on state funds after voters moved to change the school funding formula in the 1990s in an effort to limit property taxes. Since then, lawmakers have struggled to find an adequate source of revenue to keep up with rising costs.

A Democratic supermajority was poised to approve $1 billion per year in additional funding for schools, which plans to raise revenue through a half a percent tax on some of Oregon's wealthiest businesses.

The vote was slated just a day before teachers, who have been vocal advocates of the funding package, are set to walkout over what they say has been decades of disinvestment in Oregon schools. John Larson, president of the Oregon Education Association, said Republicans' behavior goes straight to the heart of why teachers are protesting.

"It just mystifies me that adults just can't sit in a room and do what's right for kids," he said. "This is why educators need to stand together and tell them to get back to work."

Republicans walked out to protest the tax plan, which they say would raise the prices of consumer goods without fixing the education system. They also maintain they would not support any funding package that doesn't address the state's pension debt, which has soared past $25 billion. Teachers are just some of the employees covered by the state retirement system, known as PERS, and school districts have struggled to keep up with rising rates.

Senate Minority Leader Herman Baertschiger said in a statement Republicans skipped out on the Tuesday vote "because it is the only tool we have to draw attention to the injustices of this legislation on Oregon voters and businesses."

Baertschiger is pushing for the bill to be sent back to committee, which is unlikely. Republicans have been meeting with Senate leadership but it's unclear if conservatives will show up when the Senate reconvenes Wednesday morning, according to a spokesperson for Senate Republicans.

House Majority Leader Ginny Burdick said by walking out, Republicans were wasting taxpayer dollars.

"When the people send you here to serve, I think you ought to show up for work," said Burdick, from Portland. "When we don't have a quorum, none of the work we were sent here to do can get done, at a significant cost to Oregon's taxpayers."

TOURISM

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In Baker County, tourism — including lodging, fuel and food sales, arts and entertainment and retail sales — generated $48.8 million in 2018.

That's up 3.4% from 2017, and a 2% increase from 2010, when the industry began to rebound.

During the Recession, visitor spending in Baker County dropped from $43.6 million in 2006 to $41.7 million in 2008, then stayed even through 2010 before beginning the current upward trend.

"This is an industry that's creating healthy economic activity across the state," Gagliano said.

Bishop said Baker County's tourism-dependent businesses have benefited from two rapidly growing, and relatively close, metro areas — Boise and the Treasure Valley, and the Tri Cities in Washington.

But travelers who arrive from much more distant places are also a crucial contributor to the county's, and state's, tourism economy.

"International travelers are enamored with Eastern Oregon — especially the Germans," Gagliano said.

She said German tourists tend to be independent, choosing their own itinerary rather than joining an organized tour group.

Those guided tours also bring many foreign visitors to Baker County and Eastern Oregon each year, and Bishop said he strives to ensure tour operators are familiar with what the county and region offer to tourists.

Bishop said he was pleased to receive a grant from Travel Oregon — the source was the statewide lodging tax — allowing six delegates from Baker County to attend a major travel show in Boise last year where they met with officials from several international tour operators.

"It helps put Baker on the map," Bishop said. "We have about two dozen active leads with tour operators as a result. The international travel market is crucial."

He's also excited that Travel Oregon's annual Road Rally, which includes both international tour companies and foreign travel writers, will arrive in Baker City today.

The group will tour downtown this evening and visit the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center on Thursday morning.

Bishop said Baker County's main source of money for tourism marketing is its lodging tax. Owners of motels, bed-and-breakfasts, RV parks and rental homes (through services such as Airbnb) collect the 7-percent tax from their guests.

Lodging tax revenue dropped in 2018 mainly because the county's largest motel, the Sunridge Inn, is undergoing extensive renovations and many of its rooms weren't available for part of the year, Bishop said.

Visitors still spend more on accommodations in 2018 than the year before — $9.9 million in the county compared with $9.7 in 2017 and $8.9 million in 2016.

Bishop said Airbnb rentals have been rising in the county.

"A lot of our visitors who would normally stay in local, independently operated motels are moving into rentals," he said.

Bishop said statistics show that although tourists who stay in motels tend to spend more locally then those who rent homes, the renters stay longer.

But it's restaurants, not lodging establishments, that bring in the most money from visitors, according to the Dean Runyan Associates report.

Tourism spending in Baker County restaurants totaled $14 million in 2018, up from $13.5 million in 2017 and $12.8 million in 2016.

Lodging ranked second, followed by:

- Retail sales — $6.3 million ($6.3 million in 2017, $6.2 million in 2016)
- Arts, entertainment and recreation — $5.9 million ($5.8 million in 2017, $5.7 million in 2016)
- Food stores — $5.6 million ($5.5 million in 2017 and 2016)
- Local transportation and gas — $4.9 million ($4.4 million in 2017, $4 million in 2016)

Oregon regulators deny permit for natural gas export site

Proposed Jordan Cove project would export gas from Coos Bay area

PORTLAND (AP) — The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality has denied a water quality certification for a proposed natural gas export project on Oregon's southern coast.

The Oregonian/OregonLive reports that in a letter Monday to the project backers of the Jordan Cove liquefied natural gas (LNG) export terminal the agency said it "does not have a reasonable assurance that the construction and authorization of the project will comply with applicable Oregon water quality standards."

The agency is in charge of administering the federal Clean Water Act in Oregon and the certification is required for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to issue permits for the project.

Opponents of the controversial project applauded the decision, but it is not a deal killer. Jordan Cove can request a contested case hearing within 20 days. The state agency also said it was making its decision "without prejudice," meaning the company can also resubmit a new application.

This isn't the first time the project has faced regulatory opposition. Federal regulators denied a license for the project in 2016 because backers didn't show sufficient demand for the facility to overcome the impacts of the pipeline on landowners. Various iterations of the project have been under consideration since 2004.

DEQ's letter to Jordan Cove described a lengthy back and forth between Jordan Cove and the agency, with multiple requests for additional information by DEQ, incomplete and inadequate responses by Jordan Cove, and late responses that provided inadequate time for the agency to review them.

The agency said it was denying the application because there "is insufficient information to demonstrate compliance with water quality standards, and because the available information shows that some standards are more likely than not to be violated."

Specific concerns included impacts on water quality from construction and operation of the Pacific Connector pipeline. The 36-inch diameter pipe would affect more than 352 bodies of water and traverse mountainous, landslide-prone areas in its 230-mile path from an interstate gas hub in Klamath County to the proposed export terminal in Coos Bay. It would also need a 95-foot right of way across Southern Oregon, a massive path that would require clearcutting timber and building roads -- creating the potential for significant erosion. DEQ also raised concerns about the release of release of drilling materials from the crossing of the Coos Bay estuary.

"Today's denial is great news for our Klamath Tribal members and other Oregon citizens that have been concerned about protecting fisheries and Oregon's waters," Don Gentry, chairman of the Klamath Tribes, said in a news release. "The impact this project would have on our waterways is only one of many reasons the Jordan Cove LNG project should be stopped for good. The Klamath Tribes are very encouraged that the state of Oregon is making this move to protect clean water, cultural resources and our traditional territory."

The project's Calgary-based owners, Pembina Pipeline Corp., announced last week that they were delaying their final decision on the project for a year and slashing their forecast spending as they waited for federal and state permits.

"Pebina's Management team is working to better understand this decision and its impacts and will communicate updates when appropriate," said Tasha Cadotte, a spokeswoman for the company.

DEQ said it had expected to issue its decision on the permit in September, but accelerated the process in order to assure it doesn't unintentionally waive the state's authority to review the project's water quality impacts. The Corp of Engineers had originally instructed DEQ to complete its review by May 7, 2019, but extended that date until September after Jordan Cove withdrew and resubmitted its application. DEQ said recent court decisions have raised questions about whether that extension was valid, so it made its decision by the original deadline.

Wyden, Merkley propose new wilderness areas

SALEM (AP) — After passing legislation earlier this year that applied the highest form of environmental protection to tens of thousands of acres and hundreds of miles of rivers in Oregon, Sen. Ron Wyden has returned with a new conservation bill.

The Oregon Recreation Enhancement Act, co-sponsored by Sen. Jeff Merkley, would create new recreation areas around the Rogue and Molalla rivers, expand the Wild Rogue Wilderness and outlaw mining on 100,000 acres in southwest Oregon, the Statesman Journal reported Friday.

The two Democratic senators said establishing the protected areas would increase the state's outdoor recreation economy, but opponents said the legislation could make wildfires worse, especially in a southwest Oregon region hit hard by wildfire the past five years, while limiting timber supply.

The bill would create three new recreation or wilderness areas. It includes:

- Molalla Recreation Area: Establish a 30,000-acre recreation area on the banks of the Molalla River in Clackamas County next to the Table Rock Wilderness Area.
- Rogue Canyon Recreation Area: Establish a 98,000-acre recreation area on the banks of the Rogue River in Southwestern Oregon next to the Wild Rogue Wilderness Area.
- Wild Rogue Wilderness Expansion: Expand the existing Wild Rogue Wilderness Area by about 60,000 acres. The federal land included within this expansion has been set aside by federal land managers as land that should be protected and conserved.

All three pieces were in previous legislation that came close to passing in a public lands package earlier this year but were stripped out following objections from Oregon Rep. Greg Walden. At the time, Walden objected to expanding new wilderness because of concerns that it would allow catastrophic wildfires to grow.

The bill would also enshrine a mineral withdrawal that prevents mining on 100,000 acres of Forest Service land around the Kalmiopsis Wilderness Area in the Siskiyou Mountains between Grants Pass and Gold Beach.