

Campaigns seeking to recall Gov. Kate Brown are optimistic

By **Aubrey Wieber and Claire Withycombe**
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Jolly old St. Nicholas doesn't care much for the governor.

Dressed in a stocking cap, black boots, red velvet pants and vest, he signed the petition to recall Gov. Kate Brown in between proffering photos with Santa in the stifling August heat at the Oregon State Fair.

His holiday booth was next to one where people could sign petitions to recall the governor, who won re-election in November.

"The main thing is being able to have an opinion when you think something's not right," Santa said. He declined to fully identify himself, saying he fears being attacked.

Santa had a very specific grievance: He said the governor's office imposed a \$400 annual fee on him for having a water well at his property east of Salem.

At a time where right-wing populists from Boris Johnson and Jair Bolsonaro to Donald Trump have accrued mainstream appeal and have secured real political power, Brown's opponents are finding an outlet for their dissatisfaction by trying to put her on the ballot through a recall petition. Two, to be precise.

The Oregon Capital Bureau interviewed about 30 people signing petitions at the fair in Salem over three days. Most were from the Willamette Valley, many from more rural areas such as Molalla or Monmouth.

Petition signers carried a variety of grievances to the two booths offering recall petitions. They named business taxes, environmental policies, and legislation allowing undocumented immigrants to obtain driver's licenses.

The state GOP's petition outlines its issues on the back, saying Brown overturned the will of the voters by allowing undocumented immigrants to get drivers licenses and approving new taxes. She attempted to violate peoples' medical freedom and impose environmental regulations, it says. She failed to fix an underfunded pension system or a troubled foster care system, and supported use of the emergency clause on bills to keep policy from being referred to the voters, it says.

Brown, they say, is the person responsible for turning Oregon into a tax-happy, gun-hating, business-killing liberal haven.

At the state GOP's booth, the traffic to sign the petitions ebbed and flowed.

Salesmen hawking beef jerky and massage chairs competed for the attention of fairgoers streaming through the pop-up mall.



Brown



Claire Withycombe / Oregon Capital Bureau

Volunteers at the Marion County GOP booth at the Oregon State Fair with petitions seeking the recall of Oregon Gov. Kate Brown.

To the south of the GOP booth, a woman demonstrated dirt-repelling welcome mats. To the north a team of men pitched people on the benefits of Dish satellite TV. The massage chair salesmen aggressively defended their territory.

But when people saw the large cardboard cutout of Trump or the "recall Kate Brown" banner, many seemed giddy.

"They can't sign it fast enough," said Sam Sapp, who was working the booth on a recent morning.

They rushed over, eagerly asking where they could sign, often following up with "I hate her" or "She's terrible."

Disliking politicians is an American tradition, but the recall process is generally reserved as a response to corruption or scandal, not a rejection of policy. In fact, no recall of a state official has ever made it to the Oregon ballot.

The Oregon Republican party claims it is on pace to get more than 300,000 signatures by the Oct. 14 deadline.

According to volunteers, the party has reported averaging a signature per minute, though the party has not released how many signatures it's actually gotten.

To many seasoned political observers, the prospect of recalling Brown is as likely as Santa Claus and eight tiny reindeer flying around the world every Christmas Eve.

Thomas Wheatley, Brown's campaign adviser, believes Republicans are juicing the stats.

"I'm extraordinarily dubious about this claim, though they do operate in the world of alternative facts," he said.

The majority of those interviewed at the fair about signing the petitions struggled to specify why they wanted to recall Brown, and seemed to be doing so based on a gut feeling.

Most commonly, people brought up cap and trade — a failed effort by the Legislature that Brown backed to curb greenhouse gas emissions.

"My understanding is

that a lot of people just don't think Salem cares about them right now," said Linn County GOP Chair Adam Keaton, pointing to that county's agriculture, timber and trucking industries.

There was also a hefty degree of conspiracy mongering. Some affiliated with the effort say they fear retaliation. They shared rumors that people signing the petitions or volunteering with the campaigns have been targeted for arson, beat up or had their cars vandalized.

Opponents sometimes cite Brown's unconventional path to the governorship: as secretary of state, Brown moved into the job as directed by the state constitution with John Kitzhaber's resignation in February 2015.

The next year, 985,000 people voted for Brown, giving her 139,418 more votes than Bud Pierce, the Republican nominee.

Last year, about 934,000 people voted for Brown. She beat GOP opponent Knute Buehler by 119,510 votes, according to the state Elections Division.

While the petition signers often said Brown isn't following the will of the voters, she won re-election campaigning heavily for the policies they oppose, such as greenhouse gas capping and an education funding package.

"We are proud of the accomplishments from this year's legislative session," Wheatley said. "Historic investments in our schools, stable health care funding, bold steps to make housing more affordable, tackling dirty diesel, campaign finance reform, and much more."

Though some doubted Brown really did campaign on such policies.

"You know, I don't believe that," said Lincoln City resident Dee Right. "I don't believe it was in full detail. I think she lied."

Right stopped by the fair booth, but had already signed the petition.

"She's only benefiting the metropolitan areas and not the rural cities that make up Oregon," Right said.

Oregon income tax refunds in 2020 to reach record \$1.6 billion

■ State's unique tax 'kicker' law requires rebates when personal income tax revenue exceeds projections by at least 2%

SALEM (AP) — Oregon taxpayers will see the largest-ever state income tax refund next year, thanks to state revenue coming in at more than 9% above projections, state economists said Wednesday.

They say the top 1% of taxpayers can expect refunds of \$15,214, while the median refund will be \$346.

The average payout to all taxpayers is expected to be \$739.

A total of more than \$1.57 billion is expected to flow back to personal income taxpayers after they file their 2019 returns.

That compares to a refund projection in May of a little more than \$1.4 billion.

The latest tally given to lawmakers continues a trend over the past two years, as state tax revenue outpaces expectations, Oregon Public Broadcasting reported .

Money flowing into the state's general and lottery funds came in \$2.6 billion above what officials expected in 2017. That created a situation where Oregon reserve funds are at an all-time high — at more than \$3.7 billion — even as economists warn of a possible economic slowdown on the horizon.

Oregon's unique refund policy also means the state can't use all of the unexpected money.

Under state law, a "kicker" is triggered whenever actual personal income tax receipts come in at least 2% higher than initial projections. In such cases, any money collected above initial forecasts flows back to taxpayers in the form of tax credits.

The unprecedented revenues have roots in a number of factors, including federal tax changes that led businesses to put off paying taxes until this year and ratcheting up corporate tax receipts by around 50%. Economists say those impacts are likely short-term.

"Even without a recession, we're expecting that it's going to be hard to match the revenue we saw in the last biennium," state economist Mark McMullen told lawmakers on the House and Senate revenue committees.

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