

Oregon News

Officials say Oregon’s electoral process is secure

■ State Elections Director Steve Trout, U.S. Attorney Billy Williams tout state, federal government partnerships designed to protect voters’ rights

By Sam Stites
Oregon Capital Bureau

The state’s top elections official wants voters to know Oregon is doing everything possible to ensure the security of the state’s elections by working with county and federal agencies.

“There was some polling that took place a couple weeks ago that said 43% of the public don’t think elections administrators are doing anything to secure our elections,” said Steve Trout, state elections director in the secretary of state’s office. “That’s the farthest thing from the truth.”

Trout addressed Oregon’s election security at a news conference in Salem on Tuesday, Feb. 4, with U.S. Attorney Billy Williams and Renn Cannon, Oregon FBI special agent in charge. They reviewed the work of Oregon’s Threat Information Gathering and Elections Resources, started a year ago to secure the state’s elections.

Election security has become a white-hot political topic in the wake of Iowa’s caucus process in the nation’s first presidential primary. Results ordinarily announced after the caucuses on Monday night were delayed because of counting issues. There was no initial indication of hacking or other intrusions, authorities said.

According to Cannon, there is a growing sophistication of cyber threats such as ransomware attacks like that of the recent breach on Tillamook County’s web systems. That



Sam Stites / Oregon Capital Bureau

U.S. Attorney Billy Williams (center) addresses the media regarding cyber and disinformation threats to the security of Oregon’s electoral process during a press conference at the Oregon Capitol Tuesday, Feb. 4. Steve Trout (right), Oregon Elections Division Director, and Renn Cannon (left) FBI Portland division special agent in charge, also spoke on how government partnerships are protecting the integrity of Oregon’s elections system.

left county officials without information technology for nearly two weeks while authorities negotiate with the attackers. Trout said the attack didn’t affect voter registration systems or databases in Tillamook County because of quick action to deactivate the connection to the state-wide system.

Such successes have Trout, Cannon and Williams feeling confident the state’s elections system is secure.

Trout couldn’t point to new threats to Oregon’s electoral process that have emerged since the 2018 election. Instead, he said, one of the most

acute dangers for voters in 2020 is misinformation.

“It also falls upon all of us individually as informed voters to be able to help make sure our elections are secure. We have to protect our democracy by not falling for misinformation or disinformation, looking at the facts and asking questions,” he said.

The briefing preceded a symposium scheduled for Wednesday, Feb. 5, in Salem where county elections officials and candidates can learn about cyber threats and how to combat disinformation on social media.

“I can’t think of a more valuable, more meaningful right than that of being able as a citizen of this country and this state to vote,” Williams said. “So that’s why what we do is so important. We’re all very excited about the symposium tomorrow evening, and what those in attendance are going to learn from the experts who will be speaking.”

The event at the Salem Convention Center is public, but space is limited, and preference will be given to county elections officials and candidates for office, organizers said.

PERS delays plan helping workers offset cuts

By Claire Withycombe
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Oregon public workers who expected to contribute more to their savings in July to make up for cuts to retirement benefits will have to wait until September.

The agency that pays out billions in retirement benefits to Oregon public workers is delaying a new program designed to allow employees to try to counterbalance recent benefit cuts by the Legislature.

Last year, lawmakers changed Oregon’s costly pension system, which is facing about \$27 billion in debt. Legislative budget analysts expected the changes to save public employers \$1.2 to \$1.8 billion in pension costs every two years, starting in 2021.

The Oregon Public Employee Retirement System, known as PERS, is a hybrid. There’s a basic pension and a 401(k)-style savings account on top.

One revision from last year rerouted a slice of employees’ salary that previously went to the savings account to help pay for the pension instead.

Employees will contribute the same amount of money to their retirement, but a greater portion will go to fund pensions.

As a result, employees say they will end up with less money when they retire.

The new law included a provision that allowed employees to choose to send some more money to the savings account to make up for the decrease.

“If they’re going to delay the implementation of the part that would allow members to spend their own money to keep their retirement whole,” says Joe Baessler, associate director of AFSCME Council 75, a union representing mostly public workers, “they probably should also suspend the diversion, at least until they can figure all this stuff out.”

Delaying the new savings option was necessary, PERS Director Kevin Olineck said in a phone interview.

The agency will let workers make additional payments to equal what they would have put in had the program started as scheduled.

“The members will be kept whole,” Olineck said.

The delay in the savings account’s start is one signal that the reforms in Senate Bill 1049 appear to be stretching the agency’s abilities.

State workers have spent 17,200 hours over six months, through December, put-

ting the changes into place, according to PERS records. More than 150 employees have been involved “to some degree” in helping to make the changes, according to PERS.

“When you have to ramp up to put into place a project of this magnitude, you have to take people off their day-to-day jobs and move them over to project work,” Olineck said. “That results in them not being able to support their coworkers or they’re taking off doing their regular operational work.”

The Legislature allotted about \$39 million to incorporate the PERS reforms.

But Olineck expects the project will cost an additional \$1.7 million, according to a Jan. 17 letter he sent to key legislators who lead committees on budget and information technology.

The project requires more office space and money to pay workers from the Department of Administrative Services and Department of Justice, Olineck said, and more money to “support program management and project execution.”

The agency could need even more money on top of that to finish the delayed project to let employees contribute more to their retirement.

STATE BRIEFING

Pendleton City council to ask voters to approve 4-cents-per-gallon gas tax

PENDLETON — Come May 19, more than half of the Pendleton City Council will share a ballot with one of their top priorities: a gas tax.

At a meeting Tuesday, the council unanimously approved asking voters for a 4-cent gas tax in the May primary election to help repair and maintain the city’s deteriorating street system.

During the public hearing, no one spoke for or against the resolution, but the gas tax has been a contentious issue in the past.

The council pursued a 5-cent gas tax in 2015, only to see nearly two out of three voters reject the proposal.

The petroleum industry opposed the 2015 proposal and local oil distributors have already indicated their distaste for another gas tax campaign.

The gas tax is a part of the council’s multi-pronged approach to raise more than \$1 million in annual funding for street maintenance.

The council held a first reading for a \$3 increase to the street utility fee and could approve it as soon as its Feb. 18 meeting.

Members also want to implement a \$2 hotel room tax, but the council is giving staff more time to research how to implement the tax.

— Antonio Serra, East Oregonian

Judge rejects state senator’s lawsuit regarding request for public records

SALEM — Senate President Peter Courtney and legislative employees didn’t improperly withhold public records requested by state Sen. Brian Boquist, a Marion County Circuit Court judge has determined.

The judge’s decision is the latest in an ongoing feud between the Dallas Republican and one of the state’s most powerful lawmakers that started during last year’s combative legislative session.

Last June, the Senate Conduct Committee received a complaint over remarks Boquist made during the session that were considered threatening. As Republicans threatened to walk out of the Capitol to prevent a vote on a greenhouse gas-reduction bill, Gov. Kate Brown said she would send state troopers to bring wayward legislators back.

Boquist said during a TV interview that Brown should “send bachelors and come heavily armed.” He also made remarks on the Senate floor directed at Courtney, saying “If you send the state police to get me, Hell’s coming to visit you personally.”

His remarks drew formal complaints to the committee. In turn, Boquist complained that he had been denied due process. He also requested documents from the Office of Legislative Administration about the complaints against him and a related legislative probe.

In July, Boquist, representing himself, sued Courtney in Marion County Circuit Court alleging that documents were withheld by legislative staff, in violating the state’s public records law.

On Feb. 3 Marion County Circuit Court Judge Daniel Wren issued a legal opinion disagreeing with Boquist after holding hearings earlier. In the opinion, which will later be formalized in a judgement, Wren wrote that legislative employees were justified in redacting information identifying the person who filed a complaint against Boquist.

— Jake Thomas, Oregon Capital Bureau



PRIME RIB DINNER
with triple chocolate dessert.
Includes fabulous chuckwagon salad bar.
\$28 each or order from reg. menu
Open at 3:30 PM on Valentine's Day!
FRIDAY & SATURDAY
February 14 & 15



OPEN: Mon, Wed, Thurs, Fri at 4:30 pm
Sat 3:30 pm & Sun 12:30 pm • Closed Tues
Open by reservation for private parties. www.hainesteakhouse.com
10 miles north of Baker City on Hwy 30 in Haines, Oregon • 541-856-3639

Coos Bay man gets 5 years for selling guns to federal agent

COOS BAY (AP) — A Coos Bay man was sentenced to five years in federal prison for selling methamphetamine and sawed-off shotguns to an undercover federal agent, court records said.

The agent with the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives set up a meeting with Theron Gerber, 36, after learning in March that the convicted felon was selling guns and drugs in the Coos Bay area.

At the first meeting with Gerber in his home on April 4, the agent saw 20 to 25 firearms displayed for sale, The Oregonian/OregonLive reported. That day, Gerber sold the agent a short-barreled shotgun, a Glock pistol, three pistol magazines, a 50-round drum magazine, two 31-round drum magazines and 91 rounds of ammunition for \$600.

A week later, Gerber sold the same agent an AK-style rifle and methamphetamine.

BEST OF HAWAII
FOUR-ISLAND
TOUR

13 days, departs year-round



1-877-840-6119
Promo code N7017

*Prices are per person based on double occupancy plus \$299 taxes & fees. Single supplement and seasonal surcharges may apply. Add-on airfare available. Offers apply to new bookings only, made by 3/31/20. Other terms and conditions may apply. Ask your Travel Consultant for details.



Portable Oxygen For The Way You Want to Live

Includes Everything You Need to Regain Your Freedom

At just 2.8" lbs, the Inogen One G4 is the ultralight portable oxygen concentrator you have been waiting for. The Inogen One G4 is approximately half the size of the Inogen One G3. Meets FAA Requirements for Travel

inogen

JUST 2.8 LBS.

REQUEST YOUR FREE INFO KIT TODAY!
CALL TODAY! 1-855-839-0752

*With a single battery © 2019 Inogen, Inc. All rights reserved.

Call today to connect with a
SENIOR LIVING ADVISOR
INDEPENDENT LIVING • ASSISTED LIVING • MEMORY CARE



A Place for Mom has helped over a million families find senior living solutions that meet their unique needs.

There's no cost to you!
(888) 651-5669
! We're paid by our partner communities