

Local & State

Democrats close stalled session of the Legislature

Democratic leaders berate Republicans who left Capitol to thwart votes on key bills

By Claire Withycombe,
Jake Thomas and
Sam Stites

Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — In an extraordinary move, Democratic legislators on Thursday effectively ended the contentious and gridlocked 2020 Legislature, killing key legislation and taking with it the hotly debated climate change legislation that Republicans fought.

It was an abrupt conclusion to a session trademarked by stalemate and bitter partisan divisions.

And it blows apart more than \$600 million pending to pay for everything from fighting wildfires to preventing child abuse.

Republicans in the House and Senate have been boycotting the Legislature for more than a week to avoid voting on a proposal meant to cut the state's greenhouse gas emissions.

Their absence meant the House and Senate didn't have the legal quorum to transact business, which stopped action on legislation.

Now, Gov. Kate Brown has declared her intention to go around the stubborn Republicans and use her executive powers to advance the climate plan without them, though she held close what specifically that would look like.

Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, and his counterpart in the House, Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, each announced the session's end on the floor of their respective chambers. No one could recall a legislative session ending with virtually nothing approved.

Kotek, typically cool even when prodded by reporters, was visibly angry as she spoke from the dais.

"We have been held hostage by a small group of elected representatives," Kotek said. "We have been open to compromise and negotiation from



Sam Stites / Oregon Capital Bureau

House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland and Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, during a press conference Thursday.

the beginning, but unfortunately, their actions turn this into a hostage situation, not a negotiation. When the only thing you want to make a deal on is the one thing the majority won't give you, you are not negotiating, you're blackmailing."

Republicans had offered to come back on Sunday, with hours remaining in the session, to pass budget bills.

That was met with ex-coriolation from Kotek, who said they behaved like a team walking off the second half of a basketball game and offering to return in the last minute on the condition they could determine the final score.

After she concluded her potent speech, state representatives attending the final gathering of the session erupted into applause.

Courtney, never one to hide his feelings, was characteristically blunt.

"This is a failed short session," said Courtney. "I cannot believe that. It's a failed short session because 11 elected officials who are state senators would not come do their job."

Courtney's remarks were part eulogy for what he views as the damaged institution of the Oregon Legislature, saying that it has been harmed by repeated walkouts by Republicans.

Courtney recalled arriving in Oregon in 1969 as a young lawyer, clerking at the Oregon Court of Appeals with five dollars in his pocket. He remembered the awe he felt, half a century ago, in the Senate where he has managed to become Oregon's longest-

serving Senate president.

"And for some reason I was drawn to this building and I got up ... And I walked across that gallery and I looked down here, all by myself" Courtney said. "I said, 'That's the most gorgeous chamber I've ever seen.' And I looked at the murals, and I said, 'What is this state?'"

The moment also prompted Kotek to look into the past, at her first opening day of a session as speaker in 2013.

"I said at that time that it's a critical time for our state's democratic institutions because the people's faith in elected leaders was strained, and faith in government, even more so," Kotek said. "On that January morning seven years ago, I could never have imagined how much more our democratic institutions would be tested as Americans, as Oregonians. Big questions are looming. Can our democracy keep the people's faith? Can elected leaders respect their oaths of office and the rule of law that allows us to get things done?"

Now, Oregonians from one side of the state to the other won't receive money that would have been appropriated from the Legislature.

There will be no \$120 million to provide more shelter and affordable housing for the 10,000 Oregonians struggling with homelessness, no \$78 million to cover costs at the troubled state forestry department and start new projects to mitigate wildfire. There will be no \$50 million for local parole and probation offices, centers for abused kids, and ad-

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— Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem

ditional judges for Deschutes and Douglas counties.

Republicans agreed some of the spending was vital.

House Republican Leader Christine Drazan in a video posted to Twitter noted that Courtney and Kotek identified spending that was "most critical to pass" and that Republicans reviewed that list.

"We agree," Drazan said in the video.

Courtney and Kotek say they want a special session to get critical legislation done. Courtney said that wouldn't happen for at least 30 days, and if it does, legislators have \$1 billion in general fund dollars to make the adjustments they weren't able to complete during this session.

"Some bills can wait till next session," Kotek told reporters on Thursday. "Some will have to get done in a special session. And we definitely have to get back to the budgets. So we are committed to transparency and process," which she said was not possible given the timelines that Republicans suggested by coming back on Sunday.

With the Legislature now functionally over, lawmakers have a modest pot of money to use for the state's most urgent needs — approximately \$75 million in an emergency reserve fund.

The Emergency Board, a panel of legislators empowered to distribute money when the Legislature isn't in session, will distribute that money.

Kotek and Courtney said they would convene the board Monday, March 9. That's how lawmakers plan to allocate \$12 million to help victims of recent flooding in the Umatilla Basin.

more than \$2.2 million to cut trees and light prescribed fires to create fuelbreaks on the fringes of the watershed. Most of the work was on the south end and along the road under which is buried the city's water pipeline, with a goal of giving fire crews a place to head off a blaze moving toward the watershed.

Cikanek said the project is a high priority for the agency's Regional Office in Portland, and he's optimistic that money will be allocated.

"It's looking very promising," he said in January.

The Baker City Council has also sent a letter to Christiansen urging her support for the project.

City Councillor Arvid Andersen, a professional forestry consultant who has urged the city and Forest Service to work together to reduce the fire danger in the watershed, said he's glad to see progress.

"I am so thankful things are moving out, finally," Andersen said.

He said City Councillor Doni Bruland has been working with Cikanek on the project as well.

There hasn't been a large fire in the watershed for more than a century, but such a blaze likely is overdue, based on a study of fire scars on old trees in the watershed conducted by researchers from the University of Washington in the mid-1990s.

In the late 1990s the Wallowa-Whitman spent

LOCAL BRIEFING

Baker City AAUW chapter meets Monday

The Baker City AAUW chapter will meet at 6 p.m. Monday, March 9, at North Baker School, 2725 Seventh St., in the model preschool classroom. The presenter will be Betty Palmer, the Baker School District's assistant superintendent, who will speak about early learning and some of the things the Baker Early Learning Collaborative has been doing to address that need in Baker City.

Heritage Museum needs volunteers

Baker Heritage Museum will have a volunteer recruitment meeting and training on March 11 at the Museum, 2480 Grove St. There will be two sessions to choose from: 10 a.m. to noon or 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. The museum is seeking volunteer cashiers and docents.

City asks to have decorations removed from Mount Hope Cemetery

Baker City's maintenance contractor, Grass Master, will soon be doing spring cleanup and grounds maintenance work at Mount Hope Cemetery, including removal of deteriorated decorations, flowers, floral designs, thatching, edging, fertilizing, and weed spraying, weather permitting. This work is scheduled for March 30 through April 9. Any decorative items, flowers, etc., should be removed prior to March 29. Items not removed from graves and headstones by that date will be collected by the contractor beginning on that date. Collected items, other than perishable or deteriorated items, will be stored until claimed or until Nov. 1, 2020. Items conforming to the cemetery rules may be placed on or returned to the graves beginning on April 10. A copy of the cemetery rules is available on the city's website, www.bakercity.com. More information is available by calling the city at 541-524-2047.

Soil/water conservation districts meet

The Burnt River Soil and Water Conservation District will have its monthly meeting on March 10 at 5:30 p.m. at the USDA Service Center, 3990 Midway Drive, in Baker City. The Baker Valley Soil and Water Conservation District will meet March 19 at noon, also at the USDA Service Center. The public is welcome at both meetings. To RSVP, call 541-523-7121, extension 100.

Governor declares drought in Klamath

By George Plaven
Capital Press

KLAMATH FALLS — A mild winter and below-average snowpack is again raising the specter of drought in Southern Oregon.

Gov. Kate Brown issued a drought declaration Monday in Klamath County, stating that the extremely low water supply is causing natural and economic disaster conditions heading into spring and summer.

"Drought conditions arrived early and have persisted, including reduced snowpack, precipitation and minimal streamflow," Brown said. "The long-term forecast for the region continues for warmer than normal temperatures and lower than normal precipitation. These conditions have had significant economic impact on the agriculture and livestock industries in Klamath County."

Snowpack is 65% of normal in the Klamath Basin as of Wednesday, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Mountain snow is critical because it acts as a natural reservoir, gradually replenishing streams and lakes during the irrigation season.

The neighboring Rogue and Umpqua basins in Southern Oregon are also lagging behind normal snowpack at 71%, while the Lake County and Goose Lake areas are at 70% of normal levels.

Ken Stahr, surface water hydrology manager at the Oregon Water Resources Department, serves as co-chair of the state's Drought Readiness Council, which considers requests from counties for drought aid. He said no other counties have filed applications yet, though now is the time of year when communities may begin to sense the impacts of drought.

The Drought Readiness Council considers both climatic conditions and local impacts when passing along its recommendations to the governor's office, Stahr said.

"A lot of it is about timing," Stahr said. "This time of year, we are really still in wait-and-see mode."

What's New At The Library

• 2400 Resort St.

FICTION

• "Long Range," C. J.

Box

• "The Numbers Game," Danielle Steel

• "Ridge Runner,"

Chad Merriman

• "Listening to Love,"

Beth Weisman

• "Boundless," R. A.

Salvatore

NONFICTION

• "Dawn Again," Do-

niga Markegard

• "DIY Guide to Paint-

ing and Wallpapering,"

Michael Light

• "Indian Yell," Michael

Blake

• "Veggie Garden

Remix," Niki Jabbour

• "GigaFlood," Rick

Thompson

DVDS

• "A Beautiful Day

in the Neighborhood"

(Drama)

• "Countdown" (Hor-

ror)

• "Knives Out" (Com-

edy)

• "Motherless Brook-

lyn" (Drama)

• "Romance on the

High Seas" (Musical,

1948)

ROAD WORK

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The work could happen in 2022 or 2023, said Kendall Cikanek, Whitman District ranger.

It's the only road through the watershed that's open to the public, as the 10,000-acre area is closed to public entry, except for limited hunting when the fire danger isn't high, to protect water quality.

Marble Creek Pass is also the southern trailhead for the 24-mile Elkhorn Crest National Recreation Trail. The road continues over the pass and connects to other Forest Service roads that lead to Highway 7 in the Sumpter Valley.

The road, which includes steep grades and sections littered with boulders, is too rough to accommodate log trucks, Cikanek said.

The reconstruction, which would include spreading gravel on the road surface, would also improve access for firefighters and for hikers, mountain bikers and others who use the Elkhorn Crest Trail, he said.

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