

OREGON LEGISLATURE

Lawmakers make progress in conflict over redistricting

By Peter Wong

Oregon Capital Bureau

The Oregon House has broken its legislative logjam with each party making a concession.

Minority Republicans gained a voice in shaping the redrawing of legislative and congressional district boundaries. The relevant House committee will have Democratic and Republican co-leaders — and the House Republican leader was added to the committee for an even 3-3 split.

In return, majority Democrats can proceed with more than 80 bills, most of them noncontroversial, without having to have them read aloud before final votes. Republicans had refused to waive the bill-reading requirement, which slowed the House to voting on a trickle of bills each day, depending on the length of their texts.

No one was talking about the tacit agreement, which came swiftly Wednesday, April 14, after the House convened more than an hour late for a scheduled evening session. The public session was delayed because of the backstage talks between the parties.

For Democrats, the bipartisan agreement allows the House to proceed with discussion and votes on a backlog of bills, most of them having emerged from committees without dissent. (The House has scheduled at least one much-debated bill for Monday, April 19. It would set requirements for firearms locks and storage, a bill strongly opposed by gun-rights advocates.)

For Republicans, the power-sharing agreement will result in them and Democrats having to agree on plans that emerge from the House Redistricting Committee to redraw legislative and congressional district lines after the 2020 Census.



EO Media Group File

Oregon's Capitol building in Salem.

The deal does not apply to the Senate, where the counterpart committee has three Democrats and two Republicans.

It is similar to what happened in 2011, when the House was tied at 30 Democrats and 30 Republicans, and the relevant committee was similarly split. That Legislature reached a compromise plan then, the first in a century, that was not challenged in court.

Incentive to get along

As a result of an April 9 Oregon Supreme Court decision, both parties — and both chambers — have an incentive not to stall. The court laid out a new timeline for lawmakers to come up with a legislative redistricting plan because census-block data from the federal government will be unavailable until late summer. If lawmakers fail to come up with a plan by the new deadline of Sept. 27, the task will fall to Democratic Secretary of State Shemia Fagan — and she will not be bound by what lawmakers have done.

Republicans would like to avoid having this task fall to a former Democratic senator who has been in the secretary of states' office only a few months.

Regardless of who does it, any plan can be challenged in the Supreme Court, which is the final arbiter.

So which communities might see the biggest change after redistricting?

During briefings in February to House and Senate redistricting committees, a population expert at Portland State University said legislative districts based in Washington County, Deschutes County and those straddling the Multnomah-Clackamas line will have to shrink because their populations have grown beyond the average. Districts based on the coast and most areas east of the Cascades will need to expand boundaries.

That could result in more urban lawmakers, and fewer rural lawmakers, across the state.

The court case last week does not directly involve congressional redistricting, which will be done by a special panel named by the court if lawmakers fail to reach agreement. Unlike legislative redistricting, congressional redistricting is not mentioned in the Oregon Constitution.

Compromise agreement

The end of the House logjam came in the form of one motion and one announce-

Senate backs bill to extend time to pay back rent

By Sara Cline

Associated Press/Report for America

PORTLAND — The Oregon Senate voted in favor of a bill Wednesday, April 14 that would give tenants struggling with financial hardships due to the pandemic more time to pay past-due rent.

Currently, tenants have until July to pay back rent, but under the proposed bill, tenants would have until Feb. 28, 2022. The bill passed with a vote of 25-5 and will move to Oregon's House of Representatives for consideration.

"We have all heard the stories of Oregonians without work, who have lost income or who have lost much of their income through no fault of their own — because of a global health crisis," said Sen. Jeff Golden, an Ashland Democrat.

Senate Bill 282 also would protect renters from the long-term impacts of not making payments on time by barring reporting to consumer credit agencies and removing back rents from consideration when submitting future rental applications. The bill would also bar potential landlords from screening out applicants based on COVID-era evictions and allow the sealing of evictions during COVID from a tenant's record.

Additionally, the bill relaxes occupancy limits as lawmakers say some Oregon residents have needed to stay with friends and family due to financial or safety situations during the pandemic. However, the bill does not extend the current eviction moratorium past June 30 and does not forgive back rent.

In March, more than 17% — or nearly 158,000 Oregon renters who answered a survey — said they were not caught up on their rent payments, based on the U.S. Census Bureau's most recent Household Pulse Survey.

In addition, 11% of Oregon renters who answered the survey said they have no confidence that they will be able to pay the next month's rent.

Among those struggling is Chevelle Barham, a single-mother and Oregon hairstylist who said, in her written testimony to lawmakers to support the bill, that she has drained her savings and still owes \$5,000 in rent.

"The last couple of months I've been receiving notices from my landlord, pressuring me to pay. But how can I? I don't even know when I'll be able to work again," Barham wrote in her letter. "I've already had to take out loans just to get by, to make sure my daughter and I have food on the table. This isn't my fault. It's not anybody's fault. I didn't choose to not pay rent. The more debt that I accrue, the more I'm going to owe at once."

Opponents of the bill argue that the measure would hurt landlords and is "a band-aid solution" for tenants.

TRASH

Continued from Page 1A

Duby, who will take over as the city's police chief on July 1, said the city had received complaints from multiple residents who live near Gwin's house at 1975 Birch St., the corner of Birch and Washington Avenue.

Duby said the city's public works department used a front-end loader to remove debris from the backyard of the property.

He and Dallas Brockett, the police department's code enforcement officer, also participated in the clean up, along with two people doing community service through the Baker County Parole and Probation Department.

Duby said the city also "abated" the property — removed trash — in October 2020.

"We're trying to not let it get so bad that it costs a lot," Duby said.

According to city and court records, a city code enforcement officer cited Gwin for violating the property maintenance ordinance in May 2015, August 2015 and October 2016.

On June 17, 2017, the city paid a contractor \$2,000 to clean up the property.

The city cited Gwin for violating the property maintenance order on Dec. 27, 2017, and four more times in 2018, according to court records.

On Oct. 29, 2018, the Baker County Justice Court issued an order allowing the city to clean up the property and then bill the owner for the cost.

The city had a \$5,600 bid from a contractor to do the work, but city officials decided to have a public works employee use a loader to gather the refuse.

The city sets aside about \$6,000 each year

to clean up properties that violate the maintenance ordinance.

In 2017 the City Council discussed the possibility of adopting a more strict ordinance, one that would allow the city to seek court orders preventing residents from accessing properties that had repeated issues with either property maintenance or criminal activity over a six-month period.

The Council tabled that proposed ordinance and never took action on it.

In December 2018 several people who live near Gwin's property attended a Baker City Council meeting and asked councilors to do something about accumulations of trash on the property.

In January 2019 the city, again employing public works department equipment, hauled away enough debris from the property to fill about five dumpsters.

Angie Stewart, who with her husband, John, lives at the corner of Plum Street and Washington Avenue, just west of Gwin's house, said they have watched the multiple abatement operations over the years. They were pleased with the latest clean up.

"We're absolutely thrilled. It has been a five and a half year journey several times to have it cleaned up," Angie Stewart said.

She said someone has been living in a vehicle parked in the alley behind their home.

"It's bittersweet," Stewart said. "Yes, we are extremely glad it's clean, hoping the homeowner can be a good neighbor."

Duby said he believes the City Council needs to consider changing the property maintenance ordinance, because the current system is not effective.

COVID

Continued from Page 1A

The latest death of a county resident happened during the week when the county had its largest number of new cases since the last week of December.

The county reported 16 new cases on Wednesday, April 14, following 14 cases on Tuesday. That's the highest two-day total at any time during the

pandemic. The county had nine more cases on Thursday.

The rate of new cases has more than tripled over the past month or so.

From March 7-20 the county reported 24 new cases.

But for the next two-week measuring period, March 21 through April 3, the period the OHA uses to determine counties' risk level, Baker County had 79 new cases.

For the current two-week

period, which ends today, the county had 71 cases through Thursday, not counting any new cases Friday or today.

Staten said most of the recent cases are connected to social gatherings.

The surge comes while the county's vaccination rate continues to increase. As of Thursday, about 31.2% of the county's 16,800 residents were partially or fully vaccinated.

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