

Bill would ban legislators from serving as party officers

By Bryce Dole,
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SALEM — A long-simmering feud among Oregon Senate Republicans surfaced on Wednesday, May 5, with the introduction of a bill pitting the main factions of the 11-person caucus against each other.

Senate Bill 865, co-sponsored by Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athena, and Sen. Lynn Findley, R-Vale, would make it a fineable offense to serve simultaneously as a state officeholder and an officer of a state central committee of a political party. Violators would be fined \$250 per day. The bill has a clause that would make it law as soon as it was signed by the governor.

While generic in its official language, the bill's most immediate effect is to challenge Sen. Dallas Heard, R-Roseburg, who earlier this year was elected chair of the Oregon Republican Party. It would also take aim at Sen. Dennis Linthicum, R-Klamath Falls, a Heard ally who was elected the state GOP party treasurer.

The bill says it was introduced "at the request of

Malheur, Baker and Morrow Counties Republican Executive Committees."

Hansell said he was recently contacted by a group of mostly Republicans regarding Heard and Linthicum. The group voiced concerns about whether the state's strict ethics and campaign laws permit their election, telling Hansell that "you're walking a fine line when you wear two hats," he said.

Hansell said that he and his colleagues sought advice from co-legislative counsel who said that there was potential for ethics violations for the senators elected to the committee. He added that the bill would mirror laws in other states.

'You make a choice'

The move for the bill, Hansell said, became especially motivated when Heard voted "no" in protest of all the bills in the committee, which include bills to fight child pornography and sex trafficking that have received widespread Republican support.

"When you're representing the ORP, are you just representing Douglas County? Are you representing the state?" Hansell said. "Enough people said, 'He doesn't represent me and he's making these statements and making these votes, and we need to have some

separation.' It reached the point where we had Republican folks supporting a bill like this, and because of the priority deadline Sen. Findley used a priority bill to move it."

Hansell said the response from Republicans so far has been mostly positive, but the move has nonetheless upset some officers from the ORP.

"You make a choice," he said. "You can do one or the other, but you can't do both. Because it's a conflict of interest and the different difficulties that arise from that."

Senate Majority Leader Rob Wagner, D-Lake Oswego, later signed on as a co-sponsor and then moved to chief sponsor, indicating the bill would likely have the votes to pass if it came up for a vote in the Senate.

Findley said he spoke with the chairs of several other county Republican central committees in his district who supported the bill but had not had time to convene their executive committees. Those counties, unlike Baker, Malheur and Morrow, are not listed on Senate Bill 865.

Suzan Ellis Jones, chair of the Baker County Republican Party, said in a May 6 statement that the county party executive committee supports the move.

"The Baker County Repub-

lican executive committee is supporting the efforts of our Republican state senators Lynn Findley and Bill Hansell," she said. "This bill simply implements a similar structure in Oregon to what is seen already in place in other states."

Findley said he believes the bill is important because legislators "can't serve two masters" but said he can't cite any specific examples of conflicts that resulted from Republican lawmakers also serving as officials in the Oregon Republican Party. Hansell also said he is not yet aware of any specific conflicts of interest.

Gun bill shows dispute

The bill was introduced the same day that the Senate voted 17-7 to approve House revisions of Senate Bill 554, a gun control measure whose provisions include a ban on firearms in the state Capitol and rules requiring gun locks on weapons.

Hansell told the East Oregonian that the GOP caucus was approached prior to the final vote in March by representatives of the Oregon Firearms Federation, which calls itself "Oregon's Only No Compromise Gun Rights Organization."

The senators were firmly asked by the interest group to

walk out of the vote and deny a quorum. When they refused and showed up to the floor to oppose the bill, some senators, including Hansell, received threatening emails from gun-rights advocates, which had to be turned over to the state police. And some senators, like Hansell and Sen. Minority Leader Fred Girod, R-Stayton, faced recall efforts for showing up that day.

"There is a fringe group out there that is sure not welcome in my office," Girod said. "It is not OK to threaten people's lives, their staff. It's not an appropriate way to lobby."

The seven "no" votes were cast by six Republicans: Hansell, Findley, Girod, Sen. Dick Anderson, R-Lincoln City, Sen. Tim Knopp, R-Bend, and Sen. Bill Kennemer, R-Canby. Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, joined the opposition.

Four Republican senators were not present for the vote: Heard, Linthicum, Sen. Kim Thatcher, R-Keizer, and Sen. Chuck Thomsen, R-Hood River, were marked as absent or excused.

Also not voting were two former Republican lawmakers who had bolted the Republican caucus earlier this year and declared themselves as independents: Sen. Brian Boquist, I-Dallas, and Sen. Art Robinson, I-Cave Junction.

Those who voted and those who skipped the floor session form the outlines of a rift in the Senate Republican caucus that became more heated this session with the original vote on SB 554.

The Senate currently has 18 Democrats, 10 Republicans, and two independents.

Democrats had the votes to pass the bill. But the Oregon Constitution requires each chamber of the Legislature to have at least two-thirds of its members answer the roll call of attendance to establish a quorum to do any business.

Oregon is one of a handful of states where the presence of a majority of members is not considered a quorum.

Senators had walked out in previous sessions over tax legislation and a carbon cap bill that opponents said would harm the state economy. Those walkouts were led by then-Senate Minority Leader Herman Baertschiger Jr., R-Grants Pass.

Baertschiger stepped down from his Senate seat at the end of the walkout-shortened 2020 legislative session to successfully run for Josephine County commissioner. Baertschiger was also elected GOP state party vice chairman in alliance with Heard and Linthicum.

Lawmaker accused of letting protesters into Capitol has COVID

By Andrew Selsky
Associated Press

SALEM — A Republican state lawmaker who authorities say let violent protesters into the Oregon Capitol in December says he is ill with COVID-19.

"I have a really bad case of COVID and I'm kind of on the mend a little bit," Rep. Mike Nearman said on a conservative radio talk show.

Nearman faces a hearing in Marion County Circuit Court on Tuesday on charges of official misconduct in

the first degree and criminal trespass in the second degree for the Dec. 21 breach of the state Capitol by people protesting coronavirus restrictions.

Both are misdemeanors, but carry possible jail time.

Nearman said this week on the Lars Larson Show that he will seek a jury trial.

"The Oregon State Police spent over four months investigating me.



Nearman

... Do you think these guys have anything better to do?" Nearman said.

The Republican, who is from the town of Independence near Salem, did not further discuss having COVID-19. On April 20, the Oregon House of Representatives canceled all floor sessions for that week after someone at the Capitol was diagnosed with COVID-19 and may have exposed people in the chamber.

Despite having gotten sick, Nearman told Larson that mask wear-

ing, shutdowns and other edicts should be voluntary.

"Let's set up some options where people have freedom to do what they want," Nearman said. "If you want to be masked and you want to be quarantined, go be quarantined. If you want to be out in public and that's an acceptable risk to you, then you can do that."

Safety restrictions like wearing masks, however, are not aimed only at protecting the wearer, but to prevent an infected person from spreading the virus.

The breach of the Oregon Capitol was a precursor to the Jan. 6 assault on the U.S. Capitol.

While lawmakers were meeting in emergency session inside the building in Salem to deal with economic fallout from the pandemic, flag-waving supporters of then-President Donald Trump, backers of the false Q-Anon conspiracy theory and anti-maskers were outside, demanding to be let in. The building was closed to the public to prevent spread of the coronavirus.



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