

Legislature OKs \$9.3 billion for schools after partisan debate

By Peter Wong

Oregon Capital Bureau

A two-year, \$9.3 billion budget for state aid to public schools is on its way to Gov. Kate Brown after a partisan fight in the Oregon House.

The House passed the budget on a 36-20 vote, majority Democrats for and minority Republicans against, after Republicans failed to send it back to the Legislature's joint budget committee to add \$300 million for the two years starting July 1.

The extra money, and more, is likely to materialize anyway in a couple of months. The state's latest economic and revenue forecast, presented May 19, projects \$664 million in excess corporate income tax collections — which under a 2012 ballot measure go into the state school fund. The third-quarter forecast, scheduled for Sept. 22, will yield the actual number.

The Senate approved the budget, 23-6, on May 25.

The excess collections, known as the "kicker," were not mentioned during the House debate.

The \$9.3 billion in state funds will be combined with a projected \$4.6 billion in local property taxes for 197 school districts. The ratio is the reverse of what it was before Oregon voters approved a series of statewide property tax limits in the 1990s and shifted the burden of school operating costs from property taxpayers to state income taxes, which account for more than 90% of the state general fund. (The school fund also gets Oregon Lottery proceeds and marijuana sales taxes. Some money from Oregon's new corporate activity tax, which lawmakers passed in 2019 and started in 2020, also is included.)

Only the budgets of the Oregon Health Authority and the Department of Human Services, both of which get federal grants, are larger.



EO Media Group/File

The state Capitol in Salem.

GOP: More money

Brown originally proposed \$9.1 billion in her 2021-23 budget, which she unveiled Dec. 1, a slight increase from \$9 billion in the current two-year cycle that ends June 30. She proposed to tap \$200 million from the state's education reserve, which lawmakers had already withdrawn \$400 million from last year to balance the budget during the coronavirus pandemic.

But since then, the overall budget picture has improved because of increased projections of tax collections from two subsequent economic and revenue forecasts, some savings from budget cuts, and \$2.6 billion in federal aid from President Joe Biden's pandemic recovery plan. (Half of that aid will be paid next year.)

Seven Republican representatives, including Minority Leader Christine Drazan of Canby, said the aid budget should reflect the \$9.6 billion advocated by the Oregon School Boards Association.

"As we ask our schools to bring kids back to have full in-person learning five days a week, they are going to be bombarded with unknowns," Drazan said. "The need for them to have the resources necessary to create an environment where these kids can be successful cannot be overstated."

Rep. Greg Smith, a Republican from Heppner who sits on the budget committee,

said boosting the amount would be a true bipartisan gesture in an often-fractured House.

The May 14 vote of the full budget committee was 21-1. Sen. Chuck Thomsen, R-Hood River, was the lone dissenter, and also opposed it May 25 when it came up in the full Senate. One Republican was excused from the committee vote.

The motion to send the budget back to committee failed with two Democrats — Mark Meek of Oregon City and Marty Wilde of Eugene — joining 20 Republicans.

Earlier in the day, Republicans attempted but failed on a procedural motion to put to a vote a separate bill committing Oregon's 197 school districts to reopen fully for the 2021-22 academic year that starts in a few months.

Democrats defend amount

Rep. Susan McLain, D-Forest Grove, said overall education spending in the new budget cycle is projected at 51% of the tax-supported general fund and lottery proceeds, and the state school fund accounts for 32.4%.

"We are creating record investments in public schools this year," McLain, co-leader of the education budget subcommittee, said.

Rep. Dan Rayfield, a Democrat from Corvallis and co-leader of the Legislature's joint budget panel, said

about \$6 billion of a projected \$28 billion in general fund and lottery spending for the next two years is one-time money.

He said he and McLain worked for four months to come up with the right figure for school aid.

"It is our job as a legislature to find out what is the Goldilocks porridge in our budget that meets the needs of our children, but also at the same time, is a sustainable budget that we can continue to operate on," Rayfield said.

Rep. Andrea Valderrama, D-Portland, leads the David Douglas School Board and is the newest member of the Legislature, having taken her District 47 seat on April 1 after her predecessor resigned under pressure.

"As a school board chair, I will be doing everything that I can to hold our district accountable to equitable spending and meaningful engagement of communities of color," Valderrama, one of nine House members of color and 31 women, said.

Rep. Paul Evans, D-Monmouth, voted for the bill. But he said lawmakers should be working toward paying for public schools at the level recommended by the Quality Education Model, which takes into account the staffing and services that students should get. The process was initiated more than two decades ago by then-Gov. John Kitzhaber, who also won voter approval of a 2000 constitutional amendment that requires lawmakers to specify why Oregon does not meet that goal. (Lawmakers never have met it.)

Evans said if the state budget were to pay fully for that model, lawmakers should be approving \$10 billion for the next two years.

"We will continue to fight over nickels and dimes to get the state school fund a little higher," Evans said. "But it is the wrong fight."

STATE BRIEFING

Oregon's public universities, including EOU, will require COVID-19 vaccination

PORTLAND (AP) — All of Oregon's publicly funded universities will now require the COVID-19 vaccination for returning students, as well as faculty and staff.

Oregon Public Broadcasting reported Friday that the final two universities to announce the decision were the Oregon Institute of Technology and Eastern Oregon University.

The schools will have a process for students to get legal exemptions. Students who attend class fully online and who don't engage in any on-campus activities will not be required to be vaccinated, the news outlet said.

OIT made its announcement Wednesday afternoon, June 2, and EOU followed on Thursday, June 3.

EOU President Tom Inkso said during a board meeting in May that many students and faculty were split on the decision to mandate the COVID-19 vaccine. In a survey, the majority of faculty at EOU were in favor of a vaccine mandate, while the majority of students were against one.

Eastern will officially require COVID-19 vaccinations when the Federal Drug Administration fully approves one or more of the vaccines. Both Pfizer and Moderna have emergency use approval for their shots and expect to get full approval later in 2021. But EOU officials emphasized in a statement that students and faculty shouldn't wait for the full approval to get their vaccines.

House Speaker wants to expel Republican who opened Capitol door to protesters

SALEM (AP) — Oregon House Speaker Tina Kotek wants to expel a Republican lawmaker who allowed violent protesters into the state Capitol in December.

Kotek introduced a resolution that says if two-thirds of the members of the House of Representatives concur, Rep. Mike Nearman would be expelled from the House. Minutes before the House opened its floor session late Monday morning, June 7, her office announced that Kotek appointed a committee to consider expulsion.

The committee, composed of three Democrats and three Republicans, will convene later this week and take up the resolution, Kotek's press release said.

The incident on Dec. 21 rattled lawmakers and staff inside the Capitol and foreshadowed the Jan. 6 assault on the U.S. Capitol by rioters spurred on by then President Donald Trump. Several of those who were among the crowds in Salem on Dec. 21 later were in Washington during the U.S. Capitol attack.

As lawmakers met in emergency session on Dec. 21 to deal with economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic, far-right rioters entered the building. They sprayed chemical irritants at police who finally expelled them. Outside, protesters broke windows on the Capitol and assaulted journalists.

Later, security camera video emerged showing Nearman opening a door to the capitol, which was closed to the public because of the coronavirus pandemic, allowing protesters to enter. Nearman allegedly told people in a video days earlier that he would let them in if they texted him, and he provided his cell phone number. The video was first reported Friday, June 4 by Oregon Public Broadcasting.

In her resolution, Kotek said personnel who were authorized to be in the Oregon Capitol described the events on Dec. 21 as intense and stressful, terrifying and distressing.

"Law enforcement officers were visibly injured and shaken due to the demonstrators' action," Kotek said.

State official: fraud 'significant' issue with jobless claims

By Mike Rogoway

The Oregonian

The number of new jobless claims is falling rapidly across the country as the nation emerges from the pandemic, but not nearly as fast in Oregon.

For several weeks, the number of jobless claims filed nationally have been at their lowest levels of the pandemic. There were 385,000 new claims last week for regular benefits last week, 20,000 fewer than the week before, and the first time the total number of new claims has been below 400,000 since March 2020.

In Oregon, though, the 6,100 new claims filed last week were still well above the number of new claims filed last summer and fall — when Oregonians were filing fewer than 5,000 new claims per week.

On Wednesday, June 3, employment department Acting Director David Gerstenfeld acknowledged that fraud is a "significant" reason why Oregon's claims have remained elevated.

"We're seeing people still trying to steal money from

the trust fund," Gerstenfeld said in his weekly media call Wednesday.

Many of those fraudulent claims are never paid, but unlike many other states Oregon has not disclosed how many false claims it does pay. And Oregon won't say how much it believes its employment insurance system has lost to fraud during the pandemic.

Fraud has been a major problem elsewhere. Thieves have stolen more than \$11 billion in California since the pandemic began last year, for example, and Washington lost more than \$200 million in the early weeks of the pandemic.

Oregon has said its losses are nowhere near that severe but won't say just how much thieves have taken for fear of attracting more attention from the crooks. The state has said the number of fraudulent jobless claims using Oregonians' stolen identities increased tenfold last year.

Cyberthieves file their fraudulent benefits applications digitally, and so they could be anywhere in the world. During the pandemic,

they have capitalized on the flood of new claims — and expansions in federal jobless aid — by attempting to sneak in illicit claims along with legitimate ones.

The thieves' focus shifts among states as they attempt to find weaknesses in each jurisdiction's claims process. In April, Oregon shut down part of its online claims form because of

"suspicious activity" on its website, delaying benefits filings from self-employed workers.

The number of new Oregon claims did show a substantial decline last week, to the lowest level since November. And the number of new claims for a separate program for self-employed workers, Pandemic Unemployment Assistance,

fell sharply, too, from 2,600 to around 1,600 last week.

Overall, Oregon's economy appears to be performing on par with the nation's. The state's jobless rate was 6.0% in April, compared to 6.1% nationally.

Fraud isn't the only reason why Oregon jobless claims aren't falling as fast as in other parts of the country, Gerstenfeld said.

Claims ebb and flow for a variety of reasons, even during normal economic times. He said many Oregonians are filing new claims because they've been out of work for a full year, have exhausted eligibility under their original programs and now must start fresh seeking new aid.

"I think that's one reason for part of the difference," Gerstenfeld said.

Prepare for unexpected power outages with a Generac home standby generator

SCHEDULE YOUR FREE IN-HOME ASSESSMENT TODAY!
877-557-1912

FREE 7-Year Extended Warranty*
A \$695 Value!

Offer valid March 16, 2020 - June 30, 2020

Special Financing Available
Subject to Credit Approval

*Terms & Conditions Apply



LeafFilter NO MORE GUTTER CLEANING, OR YOUR MONEY BACK GUARANTEED!

CALL US TODAY FOR A FREE ESTIMATE **1-855-536-8838**

15% OFF YOUR ENTIRE PURCHASE*	AND!	10% OFF SENIOR & MILITARY DISCOUNTS
		+ 5% OFF TO THE FIRST 50 CALLERS**

Promo Number: 285 Mon-Thurs: 8am-11pm, Fri-Sat: 8am-5pm, Sun: 2pm-8pm EST

*For those who qualify. One coupon per household. No obligation estimate valid for 1 year. ** Offer valid at estimate only. CSLB# 1035795. DGPL #1078358-5501. License# 7656. License# 52145. License# 41354. License# 99338. License# 128344. License# 218204. License# 603.233.977. License# 210221296. License# 210621296. License# 2105121534. License# LEAFNR0222. License# W915072. License# W9918117. License# HIC. License# H0167000. Registration# 175447. Registration# HIC_064905. Registration# C12729. Registration# C12730. Registration# 36502918. Registration# PC3475. Registration# W731804. Registration# 13V00993900. Registration# PA069383. Sulfur HIC License# 52229-H

A Smarter Way to Power Your Home.

REQUEST A FREE QUOTE!

ACT NOW TO RECEIVE A \$300 SPECIAL OFFER!*
1 (844) 989-2328

*Offer value when purchased at retail. Solar panels sold separately.



2021 EASTERN OREGON PHOTO CONTEST



Official Rules:

Photo Contest open now and closes at 11:59 pm Sunday, June 20, 2021.

Staff will choose the top 10. The public can vote online for People's Choice from 12:01 am Monday, June 21 through 11:59 pm Thursday, June 30.

Digital or scanned photos only, uploaded to the online platform. No physical copies.

Only photographers from Oregon may participate.

The contest subject matter is wide open but we're looking for images that capture life in Eastern Oregon.

Entrants may crop, tone, adjust saturation and make minor enhancements, but may not add or remove objects within the frame, or doctor images such that the final product doesn't represent what's actually before the camera.

The winners will appear in the July 8th edition of Go Magazine; the top 25 will appear online.

Gift cards to a restaurant of your choice will be awarded for first, second and third place.

Submit all photos online at: bakercityherald.com/photocontest