

Biden to unveil \$2 trillion infrastructure plan

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The Associated Press

Beyond roads and bridges, President Joe Biden is trying to redefine infrastructure not just as an investment in America the place, but in its workers, families and people.

The first phase of his "Build Back Better" package to be unveiled Wednesday in Pittsburgh would unleash \$2 trillion in new spending on four main hard infrastructure categories — transportation; public water, health and broadband systems; community care for seniors; and innovation research and development, according to people familiar with the proposal.

Those would be paid for by permanently raising the corporate tax rate from 21% to 28%, the people said, which would

unwind the lower corporate rate put in place by the Trump administration.

The next phase would focus on soft infrastructure investments in child care, family tax credits and other domestic programs, paid for by tax hikes on wealthy individuals and families, they said.

Swelling to \$3 trillion or \$4 trillion, Biden's new package proposes a massive investment on par with the Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal or Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. Taken together, the administration's approach is transforming the old ideas of infrastructure investment into a 21st century concept that includes developing the human capital of America's population.

"He's talking about physical infrastructure and we're talking about human infrastructure,"



President Joe Biden speaks in the Oval Office of the White House before signing the PPP Extension Act of 2021 on Tuesday.

Sen. Bernie Sanders, the independent from Vermont who is chairman of the Budget Committee, said Tuesday.

The president is set to deliver a speech Wednesday out-

lining the size and scope of his plan, the administration hoping to take a more deliberate and collaborative approach with the lawmakers than it did on the emergency COVID-19

rescue package, Biden's first big priority to be signed into law.

At a private briefing Tuesday for the top lawmakers of both parties, the administration shared plans for the first phase with Democratic committee chairmen and the top Republicans on the panels, a nod to the White House's efforts at outreach and bipartisanship.

The details were provided by people familiar with the call and granted anonymity to discuss it.

Funding Biden's infrastructure initiative with tax hikes has been controversial. Raising the corporate tax rate to 28% from 21% would generate some \$700 billion over 10 years, one of the people said. The administration is also eyeing a new global minimum tax.

Biden promised on the campaign trail not to raise indi-

vidual taxes on those earning less than \$400,000 but new details on the individual tax hikes were scant at Tuesday's briefing.

Even though Republicans were invited to join Tuesday's briefing, key GOP leaders are already panning the package as too big and too costly for them to support.

"It seems like President Biden has an insatiable appetite to spend more money and raise people's taxes," said Rep. Steve Scalise of Louisiana, the GOP whip, in an interview.

Sweeping in scope, the ambitious plan aims to make generational investments in infrastructure, revive domestic manufacturing, combat climate change and keep the United States competitive with China, according to administration officials.

Restaurants

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Swigert and other restaurant owners say the difficulty in finding employees is caused by a combination of factors. One is the seismic shift in Bend's economy, which has diversified in recent years, with more employment in tech and medicine.

"A few years ago it was kind of fun to work in a kitchen and flip burgers and make 15 or 16 bucks an hour, but nowadays, they are just picking other jobs," said Swigert. "There are just different ways to make money in Bend now than there was a few years ago."

Federal stimulus that has ex-

tended unemployment benefits is another factor in keeping people away from work, employers say. Anthony Avraam, general manager of the Pine Tavern restaurant in downtown Bend, says the government has become a competitor for the hiring pool.

"It's becoming harder to convince people to take that introductory-level position," said Avraam. "It was tough before all of this, but unemployment exacerbated it."

Katy Brooks, the chief executive officer of the Bend Chamber of Commerce, said some people in Bend are earning as much or more money from unemployment, with the addition

of federal aid, than they would be if they were at work.

"This situation will change dramatically on Sept. 1 when these benefits run out," said Brooks. "In the meantime, some employers are struggling to fill positions and are short-staffed as they reopen and prepare for the tourist season."

Without enough available bodies in Bend, Avraam said he has started advertising for workers in Portland and other cities in Oregon.

Avraam currently employs a staff of around 45 people but needs another 20 for the busy summer season. He holds out hope that recent arrivals in Bend will beef up the labor force.

Larry Sidor, CEO of Crux Fermentation Project, says he has enough staff now but is concerned about what might transpire this summer when more workers are needed.

"It's a baffling situation. We have high unemployment yet applicants for our open positions at our pub are rare," said Sidor. "Really wish we had a crystal ball to understand why people are not available."

The unemployment rate in Deschutes County dropped to 7% in January, down from a rate of 7.6% in December, but higher than the 3.4% rate at the same time in 2020, according to data compiled by the Oregon Employment Department.

Damon Runberg, regional economist for the department, said he is unsurprised to hear that businesses are having problems finding new employees.

"Roughly half of the unemployed workers in Oregon are on temporary layoff," said Runberg. "Those on temporary layoff are still employer-attached and expect to be called back to their previous jobs, which means that many of them are not actively seeking a new job."

Runberg explains that if those on temporary layoffs are taken out of the labor pool, then the total number of unemployed would look similar to pre-COVID-19 levels, a time

that also experienced a labor shortage.

While the lack of workers is problematic, no one is complaining about the public interest in dining out and spending money. Business owners say tables are full and customers are eager to get out of their homes.

"The population in Bend is going out like crazy. All the restaurants are very busy," said Swigert. "That is part of the problem. It's great to be busy, but you can't maintain seven days of volume with the employee breaks and days off. There just aren't enough people to maintain long hours."

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Vaccine

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"It isn't a high enough number for a medical center," Chi said. "A medical center should have a higher vaccination rate. It says that the health professionals are not fully accepting of the vaccine."

In a survey of 390 Deschutes County residents, county health officials asked if residents were likely to get a COVID-19 vaccine when one became available. In an early March survey, 49% said they were very likely to get a shot in the arm and 31% said they were very unlikely, according to the survey. The top reason for not getting a vaccine, according to the survey, was because the vaccine was too new and long-term effects were unknown.

Nationwide, according to a Pew Research Center study published in December, 60% of Americans said they would definitely or probably get a vaccine for the coronavirus, if one were available today, up from 51% who said this in September. About 4 in 10, or 39% said they definitely or probably would not get a coronavirus vaccine, according to the same study.

"Hospitals and health centers are where our most vulnerable Oregonians are, and

we have to protect them," said Jonathan Modie, an Oregon Health Authority spokesman. "OHA strongly recommends vaccinations for the health and safety of the community."

"We're not out of the woods yet. A lot of people have been vaccinated in Oregon, but many have not. Almost everyone has been affected by the pandemic: either a family member or a friend has gotten sick, people have not visited loved ones, or not been able to travel. It's difficult for everyone."

Under Oregon law and Oregon Health Authority and Oregon Occupational Safety and Health rules, employees must wear a mask, but cannot be required to be vaccinated against COVID-19, Rudy Owens, Oregon Health Authority public affairs specialist, said in an email. There is no state or federal law requiring COVID-19 vaccinations, but school-age children are required to be vaccinated against other diseases, but there are exemptions.

"The Oregon Health Authority hopes that health care providers will get vaccinated against COVID-19 and encourages individuals who are eligible to get vaccinated," Owens said. "Health care providers, whether they are vaccinated or not, must follow OHA's infection control guidance to prevent the spread of

COVID-19"

St. Charles vaccination rate doesn't provide a breakdown between patient-care and non patient-care employees who received the vaccine. However, an in-house survey done in December by St. Charles found that 90% of its medical professionals said they wanted to become vaccinated against COVID-19.

"We cannot legally require our caregivers to get vaccinated, but we strongly encourage them to do so," said Lisa Goodman, St. Charles Health System spokeswoman. "Anecdotally, we believe our health system's vaccination rate is similar to or even higher than other hospital systems across the nation."

Chi said that the best way to contain the COVID-19 pandemic is through vaccinations, even though little is known about how long they are effective in providing immunity.

"If we don't contain it, we run the risk of the virus continuing to mutate," Chi said. "The current vaccines are good against these current variants, but we run the risk of not being able to protect against the future mutations."

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House

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Danny Moran, spokesman for House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, said Tuesday the budget bill promise would not change the overall dynamics of House votes.

"House Republican leadership is still holding up critical funding for summer learning, child care, homeless shelters and wildfire recovery," Moran said. Kotek said Monday that the slowdown could cause a pileup that would bump up against the constitutional clock. Tuesday was the 70th day of the 160-day session that began Jan. 19.

"We do run into the challenge of getting bills to the Senate," Kotek said Monday. "It gets complicated."

The session ran into problems immediately after it started in January. The House recessed because of security concerns over Oregon State Police warnings of possible violent demonstrations timed to the inauguration of President Joseph Biden. No demonstrations occurred at that time.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Legislature

held remote hearings for much of the first two months. However, the constitution requires that lawmakers come to the Capitol for the final passage of bills.

Two cases of COVID-19 linked to floor activity briefly shut the House over the past month.

In response to the slowdown, Kotek has scheduled day and evening sessions for every day this week.

The schedule brings the lawmakers to the Capitol, which has been closed since March 2020 because of the COVID-19 outbreak. The ZIP code where the Capitol is located has had the most cases of COVID-19 in the state.

Both sides blame the other for having to spend so much time in the Capitol. Republicans say that too much time is being spent on bills that aren't directly related to the COVID-19, economic slowdown and wildfire relief. An estimated 4,000 pieces of legislation have been introduced, the most in a decade.

"That would be too much in a normal year and this is not a normal year," said Andrew Fromm, spokesman for the House Republican Caucus.

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Democrats want to address police reform, affordable housing, environmental initiatives, taxes, health care and gun control, along with other issues. They say Republicans are using a desperate tactic to force the will of a small minority onto the majority who say they were elected to pass the kind of legislation on the agenda.

Rep. Rachel Prusak, D-Tualatin, tweeted on Tuesday that the slowdown was tempting a health crisis.

"They're also putting the health of all legislators, staff and their families at risk as we're still fighting a global pandemic," she wrote.

So far, no lawmaker has tested positive, making Oregon one of only four states to have its Legislature virus-free over the past 13 months.

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