

State forecast paints rosy picture of revenues

By Hillary Borrud
Capital Bureau

SALEM — Oregon economists painted a rosy picture for the state's revenues and economy over the next two years, during a forecast Wednesday morning.

Economists said they expect the economy will continue at "full throttle" for another year or two, as the post-recession recovery continues.

"For the last couple years, we have been becoming more optimistic about the (2015-2017) biennium," state economist Mark McMullen said Wednesday morning.

Oregon's economists expect the state will receive \$56 million more in general fund and lottery revenues in the current biennium than they had projected in the summer, when lawmakers were drafting the budget. The latest forecast is for \$19.5 billion in total state revenues.

McMullen said the strong revenue forecast for the current two-year budget meant lawmakers would not have to adjust their revenue expectations at this point.

"I wish the same could be said on the spending side," McMullen said.

"This report is not full of surprises, which generally means we like it," said state Rep. Phil Barnhart, D-Eugene, chair of the House Interim Committee on Revenue. Lawmakers on the state House and Senate revenue committees held a joint meeting to hear the economic and revenue forecasts and other reports.

It could still take another year for the number of jobs in Oregon to catch up to the number of workers, said senior economist Josh Lehner. Lehner and McMullen said the lack of affordable housing — particularly in the Portland metropolitan area, Hood River and Bend — and weakness in the manufacturing sector could be signals of future problems for the state's economy.

Lehner said housing affordability is now a problem "for people up and down the spectrum."

Lawmakers and the state economists spent little time discussing the less rosy outlook beyond the current two year budget. In 2017 through 2019, economist projected that general fund and lottery revenues could decrease by \$47.5 million.

Gov. Kate Brown said in a press release that she will continue to monitor the revenue outlook.

Task force fighting to prevent Owyhee Canyon wilderness, monument designation

Use of 2.5 million acres in central and southern Malheur County in question

By Larry Meyer
Argus Observer

VALE — It's full steam ahead for the committee opposing a wilderness or monument designation in Malheur County.

Malheur County Court members voted Wednesday to direct the Task Force in Opposition to the Wilderness/Monument Proposal of the Owyhee Canyonlands Coalition to continue its work fighting both designations.

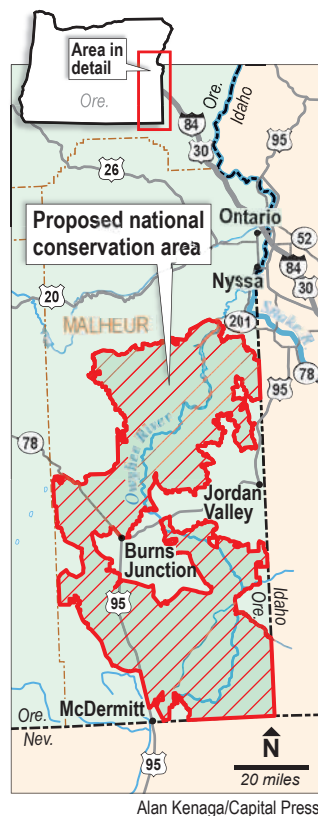
The court also agreed to move ahead with an advisory vote on the wilderness/monument proposal tentatively planned for March 8. The filing deadline is Dec. 9.

The task force, chaired by County Commissioner Larry Wilson, has been busy gathering signatures on petitions in opposition, getting letters of support from other counties in Oregon, plus letters from cities and businesses.

Wilson said 18 counties are supporting Malheur County's position.

Task force members are seeking face-to-face meetings with the secretary of interior, both Oregon U.S. senators and the White House before a monument decision is made.

John Blake, task force co-chairman, said he has not been able to set up a meeting with either senator.



Alan Kenaga/Capital Press

southern Malheur County. Other members of the coalition are seeking a monument designation for the area.

"This proposal for a monument/wilderness area is a gross overreach and misuse of existing laws and policies, which we cannot influence very effectively," task force member Andy Bentz said. "If made a monument or wilderness area, the health of the land will suffer greatly due to the progress just started on addressing the invasive species (being) stopped or made cost-prohibitive."

He said a monument or wilderness area this size will greatly impact the economic future of local industries, tribes, businesses, disabled veterans, senior citizens, communities and schools.

ONDA and other coalition members maintain that local industries, particularly ranching, will not be affected by wilderness or monument designations. They also say that the area belongs to everyone, not just the residents of Malheur County.

Bentz addressed the latter issue before the County Court.

"Those of us that live in the environment and open space of southeast Oregon share the belief that it is not land just to visit on vacation," Bentz said. "For all of

us, it represents our culture, our customs. It's spiritual, it's our economics, it's our livelihood, it's our home, while others see this land as only a place to occasionally recreate."

The recreation that occurs in the canyonlands does not have the economic benefit that supporters of a monument or wilderness keep promising, Bentz said.

The County Court had three options Wednesday, including urging the committee to keep fighting the designation. The other options included doing nothing or having the task force set up a meeting with the members of the Owyhee Canyonlands Coalition.

The third option was not a negotiation but a listening meeting, Bentz explained.

The County Court will send a letter to U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Oregon, and U.S. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, covering many of the same points that Bentz gave and urging the lawmakers to support language approved by the U.S. House in July prohibiting funds for a national monument declaration through the end of the fiscal year.

That language was included in an appropriations bill in the House. The court is requesting the senators support its inclusion in a Senate appropriations bill.

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Legislator proposes regional minimum wage

By PARIS ACHEN
Capital Bureau

SALEM — Spurred by two ballot initiatives to raise Oregon's minimum wage, a Portland lawmaker plans to propose legislation in February that would set different regional minimum wage rates based on cost of living and median income.

Sen. Michael Dembrow, who chairs the Senate workforce committee, said a legislative agreement could help avert an acrimonious and prolonged battle over minimum wage at the ballot box.

"Our hope is if we can pass it in February, that the campaigns will stop collecting signatures, and they'll feel comfortable with it," Dembrow said.

A legislative work group began at the end of last ses-

sion looking at some of the issues to consider in setting a minimum wage.

"What became clear from that was we needed to do something that is not one-size-fits-all," Dembrow said. "We needed to take into account cost of living and economic vitality in different parts of the state."

Dembrow said he envisions setting three regional minimum wage rates — with the highest rate in the Portland metro area and the lowest in rural areas.

The rates would be phased in during a three- to four-year period, he said.

"Our goal here is to get the wage where families can make it without relying on public assistance," he said.

Senate workforce committee members have yet to settle on exact numbers but hope to have those details ready in time for a public hearing Jan. 14.

The regionally tiered minimum wage would address the need for higher incomes in Portland, where housing costs are skyrocketing, without crippling businesses in slower economic areas such as the southern coast, Dembrow said.

One ballot initiative underway proposes hiking the state's minimum wage to \$15 per hour by 2019. Another initiative by a union-led coalition seeks to boost minimum wage to \$13.50 and give cities the authority to hike wages beyond that.

Dembrow's legislation would not repeal state preemption on wage hikes, which prohibits municipalities from increasing minimum wage.

Giving cities the authority to independently hike wages can be problematic, Dembrow said.

"If Portland does raise the minimum wage, and Beaverton doesn't, there is a concern a lot of businesses would relocate," Dembrow said. "We have had a lot of experience with the state setting its own minimum wage but haven't had a lot of experience with cities doing it. That is a relatively new phenomenon."

In the past two years, Washington, D.C., Seattle, San Francisco and Los Angeles have taken action to gradually raise minimum wage to \$15.

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