

Bentz: Legislature should prioritize revenue, PERS reform

By Paris Achen
and Claire Withycombe
Capital Bureau

A prominent legislator who helped shepherd a massive transportation package through the Legislature earlier this year is meeting resistance from leadership on his calls to prioritize budget and tax reform.

"Spending reform, tax reform and (public pension reform) are in another world of complexity as compared to the transportation package," said Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario, in a meeting with the Pamplin Media/EO Media Capital Bureau Wednesday, Sept. 13. "We should be starting now."

His comments came hours after a coalition called Priority Oregon announced it had filed an initiative petition to make state and local public agencies use excess revenues to pay down unfunded obliga-

tions of the Public Employees Retirement System.

The state faces potentially dramatic shortfalls for Medicaid and PERS in the next two years.

Instead, Gov. Kate Brown and House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, want to focus on passing a "cap-and-invest" carbon program in the 35-day legislative session early next year. The program would set a limit on the amount of carbon a business could emit and put a price on any excess. It would yield an estimated \$700 million per year in revenue to invest in projects to slow climate change.

"If they pass cap and invest to pull \$700 million a year out of our economy, are we going to go back a short year later and say we want another \$2 billion to address PERS?" Bentz said. "How much can our economy stand?"



File photo

Rep. Cliff Bentz is meeting resistance from leadership on his calls to prioritize budget and tax reform.

Bentz and three other lawmakers — Rep. Phil Barnhart, D-Eugene; Sen. Brian Boquist, R-Dallas; and Sen. Mark Hass, D-Beaverton — convened in late August to discuss a format for pursuing revenue and spending reform.

The Ontario lawmaker said he approached Brown

and Kotek about pursuing reform ideas now.

"What I have been told is wait until March," Bentz said.

Hass agreed that "cap and invest" policy should wait until 2019, when instead of 35 days, lawmakers have more than five months to pass laws. (The Oregon Legislature con-

venes for the shorter session in even years and the longer session in odd years.)

"Policies of that magnitude should be dealt with in the long session, and the short session should be to add changes that require prompt attention," Hass said.

"I think it is fair to say we can start a process to look at that, but I think it is something we should pick up in 2019," he added.

There are a few reasons why leadership may want to delay an overhaul of the state's interconnected budget, public pension system and tax structure.

For one thing, it's unclear how Congress may reform health care and tax policies that affect the state budget.

There's talk that Medicaid funding for states could move to a block grant format, Bentz said. That potentiality and any changes to tax policy, such as policies surrounding deduc-

tions, could affect the amount of revenue Oregon brings in.

There's also the complexity factor: simply put, tax policy is hard.

Hass, a consistent advocate for tax reform, said last month that legislators needed to address tax reform sooner rather than later, rather than risk future fiscal crises.

The Beaverton Democrat has advocated for an overhaul to the state's tax structure, a move he believes could help address the pension system's \$24 billion unfunded liability — the amount of money that the state owes retirees that its assets cannot currently pay.

Meanwhile, Gov. Brown has convened an advisory task force looking at ways to reduce the unfunded liability of PERS by \$5 billion.

"Nobody disputes the need to do this (revenue and spending reform); it's just a question of when to start," Bentz said.

Wildfire fighting costs hit \$340 million

By Paris Achen
Capital Bureau

Fighting Oregon wildfires this year so far has cost state, federal, local, tribal and private entities more than \$340 million and consumed 678,000 acres, state authorities said Monday.

All of that activity manifested into smoke-filled air and limited visibility for many Oregonians.

The "sheer volume of fires all at the same time and continuous days of growth up through Washington and Idaho" created the oppressive conditions, said Doug Grafe, fire protection division chief at the Oregon Department of Forestry.

More than 8,000 personnel from different agencies have been deployed to fight 1,903 separate wildland fires across the state. That's more than one-third of the personnel deployed to combat wildfires nationwide, Grafe said.

The most dangerous fires started in late July and early August. The region has been dry since mid-June, with no significant rainfall until Sunday. Tens of thousands of lightning strikes contributed to the severity of the fire season.

Smoke had already captured the attention of most of the state, when the human-caused Eagle Creek fire sparked in the state's scenic gem, the Columbia Gorge, Sept. 15, trapped 150 hikers and threatened the city of Portland's water supply, the Bull Run Watershed.

Fire crews kept the fire from that crucial water supply and from the Multnomah Falls Lodge, where flames came within 40 feet of the historic structure.

"A lot of what this fire was doing was spotting out ahead of itself within communities, and they were just having to go after it, and catch it," said Oregon Fire Marshal Jim Walker. "They did that hand-in-hand with all of the resources, partnering together."

Rain on Sunday evoked widespread excitement in the Gorge, where firefighters



Courtesy photo/Oregon Department of Forestry

A firefighter working on wildfires in Southern Oregon.

continued to battle flames visible from Interstate 84.

"I think we are in a good place with the rain and the conditions," Grafe said.

Gov. Kate Brown deployed the Oregon National Guard Aug. 2 to respond to several severe fires. National Guard helicopters assisted with the rescue of trapped hikers and poured 1.3 million gallons of water on burning land and structures. ODF has released the helicopters after 45 days of duty.

The conditions on air personnel are as bad, if not worse, than combat, said Dave Stuckey, deputy director of the Oregon Military Department.

The state placed 950 National Guardsmen on state active duty, a high for any year since Hurricane Katrina in 2005, when 1,979 Oregon National Guard personnel were deployed, Stuckey said.

Fire crews have suffered no fatalities, but there have been about 34 injuries among National Guard personnel and 23 among ODF personnel.

The governor's order to deploy the National Guard covered four fires: Eagle Creek, Nena Springs, Milli and Chetco Bar.

Those four fires alone threatened 19,978 residences and destroyed 10. Nearly 8,000 people were evacuated in those areas. The cost of fighting the fire was about \$15.3 million, said Oregon Fire Marshal Jim Walker.

Oregon is one of the few states with a wildfire insurance policy, but that will cover only 42,000 acres, or about 6 percent of the affected areas in the state, Walker said.

Gov. Brown touts economic development record in rural Oregon

By Claire Withycombe
Capital Bureau

The annual Pendleton Round-Up gave Oregon Gov. Kate Brown a platform to tout her accomplishments in Eastern Oregon more than a year before she is expected to run for re-election.

Although Brown, a Portland Democrat who has held the post since February 2015, has not formally announced her candidacy for 2018, her political action committee has been fundraising.

There are already official contenders for the GOP nomination, including State Rep. Knute Buehler, R-Bend, who was also spotted at the Round-Up festivities this week.

In a political era characterized by ideological divisions between rural residents and urbanites, the governor on Friday — clad in a western shirt and cowboy hat — pledged her commitment to stimulate Oregon's rural economies.

Brown, who has now attended the annual Pendleton Round-Up festivities every year of her administration, went to a VFW fundraiser breakfast Friday morning and rode a horse in the celebrated Westward Ho! Parade in downtown Pendleton.

In a speech at an annual governor's luncheon at Blue Mountain Community College Friday afternoon, sponsored by the college, the Eastern Oregon Women's Coalition and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, Brown said she was aware that the economic recovery had not fully reached rural Oregon.

"So our focus has been really making sure that our communities that are struggling have the tools and the resources that they need to make sure that their kids can get an excellent education in that community, and also grow up and get a good-paying job in that community," Brown said.

The governor recalled visiting Ontario, a town of approximately 11,000 on the Idaho border, after this winter's snowstorms devastat-



EO Media Group/Kathy Aney

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown rides with members of the Oregon Mounted Governor's Guard during Friday's Westward Ho! Parade in Pendleton.

ed the primarily agricultural community.

"I asked folks there, I said, 'What can we do to make this community better?'" Brown said. "They said, we need a transloader facility. And you know what, Democrats and Republicans in the state legislature and everybody came together and said, 'We're going to fund a transloader facility for Ontario,' and that's exactly what we did."

While overall, Oregon is adding jobs quickly and its GDP is growing, the state's rural areas are just starting to see the benefits of an economic recovery that has taken off in Portland and other metro areas of the state.

Generally, urban economies tend to be more diverse than rural ones, and as a result bounce back more quickly from economic dips such as the Great Recession. Recent advances in technology and broader economic conditions have also fundamentally changed rural businesses, such as increased automation in timber and agriculture.

But rural Oregonians can also be heard complaining of a Portland-centric government that, from a regulatory perspective, fails to acknowl-

edge the needs of farther-flung corners of the state.

For example, State Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario, whose district spans about a third of Eastern Oregon, this week expressed concerns about the effects of a proposed cap-and-invest program on rural Oregonians, who typically must drive farther to get to work, school and shopping.

His fear is that a cap-and-invest program, which would place limits on the amount of carbon dioxide that businesses could emit every year, would lead to higher prices at the fuel pump and directly affect pocketbooks and commerce in rural Oregon.

In a brief interview Friday morning, Brown countered by saying that she hopes the program can be tailored to support renewable energy projects in Eastern Oregon, where sun and wind are abundant.

The cap-and-invest proposal, still in the early stages, is backed by Speaker of the House Tina Kotek, D-Portland, and various other Democrats in the legislature.

This year's legislative session did bring some victories for rural Oregonians.

Lawmakers were able to agree on a \$5.3 billion trans-



EO Media Group/E.J. Harris

Gov. Kate Brown gets pancakes at the Cowboy Breakfast on Friday in Stillman Park while in town for the Pendleton Round-Up.

portation funding package and on \$10 million in funding for economic development projects on the Oregon side of the border with Idaho. On Friday, Brown also touted investments in housing and water infrastructure.

Chuck Sams, communications director for the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, who introduced the governor before she made remarks at the luncheon, said his community was pleased by the success of the transportation package and the renewal of a special economic development zone on the reservation.

Sams said the tribes monitored more than 300 bills this legislative session, and while he keeps a close eye on gun-related legislation and wishes there was more funding for mental health treatment in the region, he was mostly pleased with policymakers' recent handling of issues affecting rural Oregon.

For all of their political and cultural differences, rural and urban Oregon do face some common challenges, such as a dearth of affordable housing.

Brown, a former legislator, concluded her speech Friday on that note, with a recollection that State Sen. Ted Ferrioli, R-John Day — now the Senate Minority Leader — attended her wedding in 1997. For Ferrioli, that meant a five- or six-hour drive.

"It doesn't matter where you live," Brown said. "It doesn't matter who you voted for. We all think that Oregon is special, and I know that by working together, we can keep it that way."

THE JUNIPER ARTS COUNCIL
& JOHN DAY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH PRESENT
KERRY GROMBACHER
in concert
WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2017, 7 PM
AT THE JOHN DAY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

"Kerry Grombacher is the best kind of songwriter, with lyrics that take us on journeys to places we've never visited before, and melodies so pure and true that they seem to rise up from the plains..."
- Nalini Jones, Newport Folk Festival

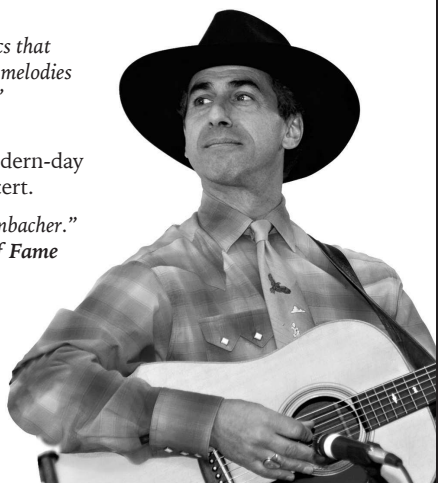
The Juniper Arts Council is pleased to bring this modern-day troubadour back to Grant County for an encore concert.

"There is no truer example of a troubadour than Kerry Grombacher."
Dave Stamey, 2016 Inductee, Western Music Hall of Fame

The concert is free
and open to the public.

The Juniper Arts Council will accept donations for its scholarship fund.

In 2017, the JAC gave three \$500 scholarships to Grant County graduates.



06092

AGCO PARTS

MASSEY FERGUSON

HESSTON

Robbins Farm Equipment

3850 10th St. Baker City 541-523-6377

62302 Pierce Rd. La Grande 541-963-6577

1160 S Egan Burns 541-573-6377

86812 Christmas Valley Hwy. Christmas Valley 541-576-2160

06145