

State-of-the-state focuses on inclusive economy

By Paris Achen
Capital Bureau

Gov. Kate Brown dedicated her state-of-the-state speech Monday to addressing the issue of Oregonians who have been left behind by the state's economic prosperity and steady job growth.

"Oregon's rising economic tide should be lifting all boats. Yet many hardworking families are still under water," Brown said.

While some Oregonians are working two jobs to get by, state economists are projecting 27,000 high-wage job openings each year through 2024, many of which will occur in the technology industry. Currently, one out of every four job openings in that industry is filled by out-of-state hires, she said.

"It is clear there is a gap between the skills Oregon's workers have and the skills that our growing businesses

need," Brown said.

She announced that she would launch a new program designed to provide job and skill training to help fill the gap. Dubbed "Future Ready Oregon," the program's goal is to "close the skills gap between the workforce we have and the workforce we need to fuel Oregon's economy," she said.

The program would earmark \$300 million to career technical education classes in the 2019-2021 state budget. Without providing details, Brown said the program would make hands-on learning programs available at every public school district in the state. The program also would offer apprenticeships in high-needs industries such as information technology, health care, advanced wood manufacturing and high-tech manufacturing. Such programs already exist in Bend and Eugene, she said.



Pamplin Media Group/Jaime Valdez

Gov. Kate Brown Monday delivers her state of the state address opening the Legislature's 35-day session.

The plan includes legislation to help mid-career construction professionals to start their business by among other things, waiving all state fees and formal education requirements for those who have worked in construction for at least eight years.

She said she is directing Business Oregon to invest in rural areas, communities of

color and Oregon's nine tribes.

An example of such an investment is state funding of broadband and infrastructure to increase competitiveness in rural industries, she said.

Her plan also involves directing the Higher Education Coordinating Commission and Business Oregon to collaborate to match high-growth industries with job

training programs.

In addition to job training, she said the state needs to continue to address the high cost of housing.

Her office is scheduled to announce several pilot programs in the coming weeks to address the state's housing shortage and high cost of housing.

Brown delivered the speech in the House of Representatives at the Oregon State Capitol, and footage was streamed live on the Oregon Legislature's website.

The address kicked off the 79th Legislative Assembly and a 35-day policymaking session.

This month marks three years since Brown, previously the secretary of state, succeeded Gov. John Kitzhaber, who resigned amid an influence-peddling scandal, and her first anniversary as elected governor. She is seeking reelection later this year, having

almost completed the remainder of Kitzhaber's term.

A pressing issue this session is adjusting the state budget to account for a projected \$280 million in unrealized tax revenue due to recent federal tax reform.

A week before session commenced, leaders in the Senate extinguished most hope of passing a state "cap and invest" program for industry this year, which is a policy priority for House Democrats and has the support of the governor. Senate Majority Leader Ginny Burdick, D-Portland, said that such a complex policy was better suited for the Legislature's longer session in 2019. The program would charge industry for releasing greenhouse gases and invest the proceeds into projects intended to curtail global warming.

Since 2010, the Legislature has convened for 35 days in even years and for 160 in odd years.

Leadership differs on scope of legislative session

By Claire Withycombe
Capital Bureau

Oregon's legislative leaders appear to differ as to what can be accomplished during the upcoming legislative session.

House Democrats have unveiled a slew of policy ideas, although Republicans and both parties in the Senate expressed trepidation about trying to do too much when the Oregon Legislative Assembly convened for its short session Feb. 5.

In even-numbered years, the Legislature meets for sessions that can last up to 35 days. In odd-numbered years, they meet for about five months to hammer out the state's two-year budget.

Leaders of the party caucuses in the House and Senate, as well as Oregon Gov. Kate Brown, took questions from reporters at the state capitol Jan. 29.

Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, said he expected to be "sweating rocks," due to the swift deadlines during the short session.

Legislators have to move quickly if they want bills to move out of policy committees and to the floors of each chamber for a vote.

"My biggest concern is ... to try to get through the session without doing harm to things we want to do long-term," Courtney said. "... Already the expectations are well beyond what you can do in a 35-day session."

Senate Majority Leader Ginny Burdick, D-Portland, said that the short session would be largely focused on the state budget.

"The purpose of the short session is to deal with budget matters and urgent matters that can't wait until the long session," Burdick said, adding that voters' affirmation of a state funding package for public health care in a special election Jan. 23 makes the task less burdensome. "We had an easier job than we might have had if Ballot Measure 101 had not passed."

Burdick said that education is a "top priority," as legislators come together on a bipartisan, bipartisan committee aimed at improving student outcomes and soliciting feedback from Oregonians about the state's public education system.

Senate Republican Leader Jackie Winters, of Salem, newly appointed to lead the caucus, said she hopes for a "bipartisan atmosphere" during the session.

Winters said she is prioritizing a bill that would expand protections for whistleblowers, and is also focused on bills that address collective bargaining and government spending.

House Democrats released a set of policy priorities that included boosting consumer protections, gun safety and affordable housing; reducing class sizes in public schools and expanding career and technical training.

They also want to revise the state's constitution to include health care as a basic right.

House Minority Lead-

er Mike McLane, R-Powell Butte, called House Democrats' priorities "ambitious" and "aggressive," saying they were geared more toward the November election — including an effort to make health care a right in the state's constitution.

House Majority Leader Jennifer Williamson, D-Portland, said she understands the language in the bill, championed by State Rep. Mitch Greenlick, D-Portland, which

refers the issue to voters, to be "aspirational."

"My understanding is (Greenlick's) goal is not to set up a right of action but to set up an aspirational goal," Williamson said.

McLane disagreed, saying the measure "may be aspirational in how it's marketed, but it is absolutely functional in the leverage that they're seeking to dictate public funding, so we have to talk about that."

"The question becomes, what's the purpose of this, outside the political ramifications from the 2018 campaign, where Congress' health care discussion may give them some leverage in swing districts?" McLane said.

But Speaker of the House Tina Kotek, D-Portland, struck a more sanguine tone, saying that she thought that leadership on both sides of the aisle could broker compromise during the course of

the short session.

Kotek acknowledged the existence of some "unknowns" when it comes to the effects of federal tax reform on state revenues, as well as the need to reconcile "larger-ticket" budget holes, such as the high cost of the 2017 fire season, which ravaged communities from the Southwest coast to the Columbia River Gorge.

It's still not clear what the precise effect of federal tax

reform will be on Oregonians or on the state's revenues, although analyses by state economists are underway. A more complete picture of the state's revenue outlook is expected Feb. 16.

Gov. Brown, a Democrat who is seeking reelection in November, reiterated the policy priorities she introduced several weeks ago, when legislators convened for a round of interim committee meetings in early January.

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