

Joint Ways and Means Committee presents \$23.2 billion budget plan

By Mark Miller
Oregon Capital Bureau

Oregon's K-12 schools won't feel pinched under a proposal unveiled by legislative budget-writers Thursday, but other government services throughout the state are likely to see cuts.

The co-chairs of the Joint Ways and Means Committee presented a \$23.2 billion budget plan. That represents a 10 percent increase from the approved 2017-19 state budget, but not enough to maintain current service levels.

Spending in nearly every area of the budget comes in below what state economists say will be needed to keep service levels steady over the next two years. That would likely mean public employee layoffs, less grant money available to organizations and municipalities that rely on state support and other reductions as Oregon's state government tightens its belt.

In her \$23.6 billion budget proposal released late last year, Gov. Kate Brown called for spending \$8.87 billion in general and lottery revenues for the K-12 state school fund, the main source of money for school districts throughout Oregon. The leg-



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islators did likewise in their proposal.

"We're putting \$668 million more into the current service level than the previous biennium, which is a non-trivial sum of money," Sen. Elizabeth Steiner Hayward, D-Beaverton, said. "We're doing the best we can with the available resources. We recognize that it's not ideal."

State Rep. Dan Rayfield,

D-Corvallis, vowed that lawmakers will be "working this entire session to try and find more money" for public education.

Unlike Brown's budget, the lawmakers' proposal does not assume any tax increases will give budget-writers more money to spread around. Brown recommended changing Oregon's business tax code and ending payments to counties

under the Gain Share program, lessening the need for state budget cuts.

The cost of providing public services tends to increase every year due to inflation, cost-of-living adjustments for employees, rising pension obligations and other economic factors.

The Oregon Health Plan isn't entirely spared from cuts the way that the state schools fund is, but Steiner

Hayward, who is a practicing physician, said the co-chairs are proposing no cuts to patient services.

"There may be some areas of savings for administration, but we will not be cutting eligibility or benefits for any Oregonian who receives services or is eligible for services through OHP," Steiner Hayward said.

Steiner Hayward was one of two senators named to co-chair Ways and Means for this session. State Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, said the three co-chairs have worked well together, and she suggested that their geographic diversity helped guide their budget proposal. All are from western Oregon, but Johnson represents a mostly rural district northwest of Portland, Steiner Hayward represents an urban district on Portland's Westside and Rayfield represents part of the mid-Willamette Valley.

"We all brought our own ability to project the concerns of all of Oregon into this budget," Johnson said.

Rayfield said the committee's job is to balance the cost of government services with the available resources.

"This is not a perfect budget," he said. "There will

be folks who are not happy with this budget."

The Senate Republican leader isn't one of those folks.

"For the first time in my career in the Senate, it is refreshing to get a glimpse at a budget framework that is fiscally responsible and will leave a healthy ending balance," said state Sen. Herman Baertschiger Jr., R-Grants Pass, in a statement released shortly after the budget was unveiled Thursday.

Johnson, Rayfield and Steiner Hayward said keeping Oregon financially stable is one of their main objectives. They want to avoid deeper cuts in the coming decade, especially if the state's economy slows down.

"This takes a significant step toward creating sustainable budgets in the future," Rayfield said.

The Legislature is required to approve a balanced budget for the next biennium by the end of June. With both the governor's budget proposal and the Ways and Means co-chairs' plan now on the table, the state's leaders have until the end of the legislative session to hammer out an agreement.

Legislature's \$1.1M sexual harassment settlement will divert funds budgeted for other purposes

By Claire Withycombe,
Aubrey Wieber
and Mark Miller
Oregon Capital Bureau

In the next month, the Legislature will write a check for \$1.1 million to finish its settlement of sexual harassment claims at the Capitol.

But it won't be legislators or employees accused of the misconduct who have to pay.

The money comes from taxpayers.

The settlement between the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries and the Legislature was announced Tuesday.

Nine victims will receive up to \$415,000 each.

The Legislature will pay for the settlement using extra money initially budgeted for other purposes, according to Legislative Fiscal Officer Ken Rocco.

The Legislative Assembly, which is part of the overall legislative branch of state government, has spent about 70 percent of its \$41 million budget and is 80 percent of the way through its current two-year budget cycle, which ends June 30.

The Legislature gets nearly all of its money from the state's general fund, which is paid by taxpayers, according to state records.

The legislative branch has spent less than expected on personnel, Rocco said. When the economy is doing as well as it is now, fewer people want the part-time, limited-duration jobs available during the session.

Under the settlement, the Legislature will cut the check to the state labor bureau within 30 days.

Then the labor bureau will distribute the money to the victims of harassment.

The Legislature will pay nearly \$1.1 million in non-economic damages to eight victims, about \$26,000 in legal fees to a state senator who was harassed, and \$200,000 to the labor bureau for attorneys' fees and out of pocket expenses.

The bureau's investigation, released Jan. 3, focused largely on the actions of former state Sen. Jeff Kruse, R-Roseburg, who resigned a year ago, although the behavior of three lawmakers was called out in the report.

But it's not clear which

lawmakers' actions led to settlement money for which victims.

A spokesman for the labor bureau declined to disclose that information Wednesday.

The settlement caps allegations dating back to October 2017, when Sen. Sara Gelsler, D-Corvallis, publicly accused Kruse of inappropriate behavior.

Internal investigations by the Legislature were followed by the labor bureau's investigation and resulting complaint in January against legislative leaders.

Kruse was named as a respondent in that complaint, but other legislators were not.

Private talks in recent weeks between the labor bureau and legislative leaders produced the settlement announced this week.

The labor bureau reached out to Kruse to participate in the conciliation process but he didn't respond, a spokesman for BOLI said.

The settlement, which was signed by Senate President Peter Courtney, Speaker of the House Tina Kotek and Labor Commissioner Val Hoyle, doesn't say specif-

ically whether the victims can separately pursue their abusers.

A separate agreement protects the Legislature from future legal claims from the victims who were paid settlements.

Kotek's office was considering a request Thursday from the Oregon Capital Bureau for access to that agreement.

An attorney for two interns who were harassed by Kruse said her clients don't plan to sue the former state senator.

"At this time, my clients do not intend to pursue any rights that may still exist against Jeff Kruse in his individual capacity after their currently filed case is dismissed," Charese Rohny said in an email Thursday.

The settlement calls for the Legislature to adopt recommendations from an Oregon Law Commission work group formed to tackle sexual harassment in the Capitol. House Bill 2859 would create a confidential channel for lawmakers, lobbyists, and state employees and contractors to report harassment in the Capitol.

Those complaints would go through a proposed Legislative Equity Office and could be excluded from public disclosure.

HB 2859 and Senate Bill 744, which creates the Equity Office, received a mixed reception at a Feb. 6 public hearing.

Gelsler read anonymous testimony from two women who complained of harassment, who urged lawmakers to abandon the idea of restricting disclosure of information about harassment.

One of Gelsler's staffers also testified, telling members of the Capitol Culture Committee, "By trying to complicate the process, you are discouraging survivors from coming forward."

A spokesman for Sen. Ginny Burdick, D-Portland, who co-chairs the committee, confirmed Thursday that leadership intends to move forward with those bills, although they have yet to be scheduled for a vote in committee.

Meantime, Gelsler, Sen. Tim Knopp, R-Bend, and Rep. Karin Power, D-Milwaukie have proposed leg-

islation to prohibit using public money or campaign money as "hush money" for victims of sexual harassment and abuse who agree not to publicly disclose their allegations.

Testimony on Senate Bill 478 explained the legislation would end the practice of using public money or campaign money to coerce someone to sign a nondisclosure agreement.

Gelsler testified the issue was transparency. Someone running for office shouldn't use that money to arrange to buy a victim's silence, she said.

Looking ahead, Gelsler said in an interview that she hopes the settlement will signal victims of harassment that they can come forward and "seek remedy." But beyond that, she wants the environment in the Capitol to change.

"I just think it's important that we don't wash our hands of this now and say, 'We wrote a check, it's all over,'" Gelsler said. "We need a complete transformation of our culture. And that's a lot more than words, and it's a lot more than policies."

Legislator backs study of extending commuter rail from Wilsonville to Salem

By Mark Miller
Oregon Capital Bureau

Ten years ago, the Westside Express Service began running between Beaverton and Wilsonville.

State Rep. Mitch Greenlick hopes that in another 15 years it will run south to Oregon's capital city.

House Bill 2219 would commission a 17-member task force to study the concept of extending WES commuter rail to Salem, determining whether it would be feasible or beneficial. The bill received an initial public hearing before the Legislature's Joint Transportation Committee on March 4. No committee vote has yet been scheduled to advance the legislation.

"It would make WES

much more viable," Greenlick said before the hearing. "I think WES would be much more effective if it had the riders that would come from ... the north Salem area."

WES is part of the TriMet system, which treats bus, light rail and commuter rail fares as interchangeable. The typical fare is \$2.50 for two and a half hours, or \$5 for a full day.

Like nearly all commuter rail systems, WES operates at a loss, meaning a trip costs more than what the rider pays for it. An average commuter trip costs TriMet \$18.14. That makes WES considerably more expensive to operate, relative to the number of riders, than TriMet's bus and light rail services. MAX's average operating cost per ride is \$2.95.



Pamplin Media Group

A TriMet WES train arrives at the Beaverton Transit Center. A bill introduced in the Legislature could extend WES trains south to Salem.

Ridership on WES has also been decreasing year over year, which TriMet spokeswoman Roberta Altstadt attributes to business closures along the commuter route. Last fiscal year, WES provided 265,668 rides — on average, 5,109 trips per week.

"Those who do ride WES often call it the best kept secret as it provides a quick, reliable and comfortable ride between Wilsonville and

Beaverton," Altstadt said.

A 2010 state study concluded that extending WES to Salem was "technically feasible," but it would be a complex project that would cost up to \$387 million to build. The amount TriMet must spend for WES operations every year would likely triple, the study added. It made no recommendation on how to proceed, and the idea got little further public attention.

Greenlick is restarting the conversation.

Shelley Snow, Oregon Department of Transportation spokeswoman, said in an emailed statement, "We understand the goal of the bill's sponsor and should the bill pass, we look forward to participating in the task force and/or in any other way that would be helpful."

Express transit between Wilsonville and Salem exists today in the form of bus line IX, which runs as a partnership between Wilsonville's bus service SMART and Salem-area transit operator Cherriots.

Cherriots did not respond to a request for comment, but SMART transit director Dwight Brashear praised Greenlick's bill at Monday's committee hearing.

"I think this is an opportunity for us to study something that will benefit future generations to come," Brashear testified.

SMART and Cherriots

track ridership for all of their routes, including bus line IX. Last fiscal year, the route averaged 1,386 boardings per week, with SMART serving the majority of them.

Officials from Beaverton and Wilsonville testified in favor of Greenlick's bill. In a letter of support, Wilsonville Mayor Tim Knapp suggested SMART could "re-deploy assets" to cover other unserved areas if WES was extended to Salem.

Officials in Tigard and Tualatin are watching as well. Sherilyn Lombos, Tualatin city manager, said her City Council supports extending WES.

"Anything that adds service to Tualatin, we're interested in," Lombos said.

Interstate 5 runs through Tualatin and Wilsonville, and during peak commute hours, the freeway can become choked with vehicles. Lombos and Knapp see a WES extension as potential congestion relief.

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