

Bill would allow stations to expand self-service gas in Oregon

By Mark Miller
Oregon Capital Bureau

A bill introduced in the House would allow more gas stations to offer self-service pumps.

Oregon and New Jersey are the only two states in the union that don't allow self-service gas stations statewide. Oregon lawmakers started chipping away at that prohibition two years ago, when they legalized self-service in counties with populations under 40,000.

But a bill that received a public hearing March 20 would take that a step further, allowing any gas station in Oregon to designate up to a quarter of its fuel pumps for use by customers who want to fill their own tank.

House Bill 3194 is a compromise solution to a sticky issue, explained bill sponsors Rep. Julie Fahey, D-Eugene, and freshman Rep. Daniel Bonham, R-The Dalles.

"I've had this idea in my head for several years as a possible way to give everyone what they want," Fahey

said. "It would protect full-service gasoline for the people who really strongly want that — and there are a lot of Oregonians that do — and it would give the option for self-service gas to the people who want that. And it would give business-owners the choice."

Bonham represents one of the largest and most sparsely populated districts in the state. On top of that, he drives a truck for work, with a service area that ranges into Washington.

Both Bonham and Fahey drive vehicles that let them take advantage of lesser-known gaps in Oregon's ban on self-service. Bonham's truck runs on diesel, which drivers can pump themselves because it's classified separately from gasoline. Operators of motorcycles and motorized scooters, like Fahey, are allowed to pump their own fuel as well.

Bonham and Fahey said they enjoy that convenience, and they want to extend it to motorists regardless of what

they drive.

"I think all of us have experienced a time when we've pulled up to the gas station and the attendants were very busy," Bonham said.

Even with the choice, he would still use full-service sometimes, Bonham said. But he added, "For the times when I felt like I was in a hurry, if there was a pump available, I would love to have that quick access."

Full-service gas stations were once commonplace across the country, but self-service came into vogue in the 1970s, and full-service stations are now rare outside Oregon and New Jersey.

Fahey and Bonham said they don't want to do away with full service altogether.

"I really don't want anybody to lose their work over allowing for self-service," Bonham said. "And I think the majority of people still like full-service gas."

"Part of the reason for the 25 percent number is because you still have to have someone who is out,

who is dispensing gas," Fahey said. "That would mitigate the potential job losses."

But Fahey also noted that many business owners are having trouble hiring.

"If we're going to make a change that might have some potential for some small job loss, now would be the time to do it, because the unemployment rate is so low," Fahey said.

At the hearing, state Rep. Rob Nosse, D-Portland, argued against self-service gas.

"While some people may not view these jobs as glamorous careers, it's honest, entry-level work where people employed doing this work can build a work ethic and acquire the basic skills needed to succeed in a work environment," Nosse said.

Nosse voted to allow self-service in low-population counties in 2017 because he saw it as a safety issue, he said, but he sees HB 3194 differently.

"What I really think is that something quirky and

charming about our state would be lost with this bill," Nosse said. "Oregon would lose part of its culture, part of what makes this state unique."

Rep. Susan McLain, D-Forest Grove, said she agrees with Nosse, but she appreciates that the bill would preserve the full-service option.

"Really and truly, there are people who can pump gas and people who can't do it, and there are people who are of the age they shouldn't be doing it," McLain said. "I think it's important for us to be there for everybody where they are at any skill level, even that of pumping gas."

State Sen. Brian Boquist, R-Dallas, said he likes the idea of leaving it up to gas station owners as to whether they will allow self-service. Limiting self-service to a quarter of the pumps is "more than an adequate compromise," he argued.

Under HB 3194, gas stations wouldn't be able to charge different rates at full- and self-service pumps. They

also wouldn't be able to set different business hours for them.

"We wouldn't necessarily want to allow a gas station to stay open 24 hours a day for the self-service pumps only," Fahey said.

However, Boquist and state Sen. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario, picked up on Nosse's comments about self-service being a safety measure in sparsely populated areas.

"This is not a question of convenience," Bentz said, invoking the image of a motorist low on gas waiting all night in a small town for the gas station to re-open.

Making 24-hour self-service available on a wider basis could improve safety throughout Oregon, Boquist suggested.

"The fact that you can access fuel at various times of the night also is just as important in the rural portions of the Willamette Valley and elsewhere," Boquist said. "I would just encourage people ... to have an open mind on this particular matter."

Legislature's top personnel executive retires amid sexual harassment controversy

Christopher will receive \$12,000 per month until September to work from home

By Claire Withycombe
Oregon Capital Bureau

The Legislature's top personnel executive, embroiled in the sexual harassment controversy at the Capitol, has retired but will draw more than \$12,000 a month until September to work from home.

Lore Christopher, 64, negotiated a retirement agreement last fall in which she agreed to step down as director of human resources at the Legislature.

She formally retired Jan. 1. She remained acting director until her replacement started March 11.

Christopher declined an interview and didn't respond to most written questions from a reporter about her departure.

As human resources direc-

tor, Christopher was a key contact for people reporting harassment or other workplace problems at the Capitol.

She was identified in a state investigation of harassment at the Capitol as one of the officials who failed to react fully to complaints. The state Bureau of Labor and Industries reported that in at least one instance Christopher advised an employee complaining of harassment to stay mum.

The harassment investigation disrupted the early days of the 2019 Legislature, capped with legislative leaders agreeing to pay \$1 million to nine people who asserted they had been harassed at the Capitol.

As part of the settlement, legislative leaders agreed to shift responsibility for harassment claims away

from Christopher's office to a new office.

Jessica Knieling, previously the deputy human resources officer for the state Department of Administrative Services, joined the Legislature as its interim director of human resources March 11.

Christopher's departure and Knieling's employment were announced to legislative employees in a March 7 email but no public statement was issued about the change.

The terms of Christopher's retirement were outlined in a four-page agreement obtained this week by the Oregon Capital Bureau.

She signed the deal on Sept. 11, 2018. The contract said that she would retire by year's end but continue as the acting director until a replacement was hired.

She agreed to "a home office base, performing work as assigned" using a state-provided laptop com-

puter, according to the document

She was tasked with what were described as special projects, including a pay study of seven legislative jobs, implementing new pay equity standards for legislative employees, and providing help with two pending lawsuits against the Legislature.

Christopher also agreed not to sue the state for age discrimination, a provision neither Christopher nor legislative leaders would explain.

The agreement said she would be paid \$12,116 a month — her pay rate as human resources director — through August for a total of \$96,928 in 2019.

Nearly a month after agreeing to retire, Christopher shared the news with certain legislative offices and officials, including top economists and political staff.

"It has been a pleasure to work with you for more than 22 years as human resources director and

it's hard to believe that many years have gone by. I'm honored to have spent them with you," she wrote in an Oct. 5 email.

Her retirement deal was struck one month after then-Labor Commissioner Brad Avakian filed his complaint against legislative officials that included references to conduct by Christopher.

The commissioner's complaint centered on the Legislature's handling of harassment allegations by colleagues and two interns against former state Sen. Jeff Kruse, a Roseburg Republican who resigned in March 2018. It also cited other allegations of harassment in the Capitol, including from two unidentified employees, including one Avakian identified only as Employee A.

Audrey Mechling, a former staffer in the House, later publicly identified herself as that worker. She received a part of the settlement announced March 5.

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