

Legislators prepping to tackle guns, wildfires, homelessness

35-day short session will be a legislative sprint to complete unfinished business, pass new laws on key issues facing Oregonians

By Sam Stites, Jake Thomas and Claire Withycombe
Oregon Capital Bureau

Legislators will roll up their sleeves for some speedy politicking in February, tackling some of Oregon's thorniest problems.

When they gather for the month-long legislative session, legislators want to improve the state's care for people with mental illness and its ability to fight increasingly destructive wildfires.

They want to protect the state's air quality by decreasing the state's greenhouse gas emissions. Also high on the "to-do" list is moving thousands of Oregon's homeless people off the street and into housing.

Lawmakers expect to cooperate across party lines in the Democrat-controlled Legislature to progress on run-of-the-mill issues and budget fixes.

But the greenhouse gas proposal poses the risk of a political blowout. Last year, Senate Republicans fled the state to avoid taking a vote on a similar proposal. They have said such an act remains an option for them in February.

Other controversial issues coming back to life include campaign finance reform and firearm regulation.

Here's a guide to what to watch once legislators convene in the Capitol on Feb. 3:

HOMELESSNESS

The issue: The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development estimates that about 15,800 Oregonians are homeless. About 64% are "unsheltered," meaning they live in public or private places not meant for human habitation, such as cars or public parks. House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, wants lawmakers to declare a state of emergency and to provide roughly \$120 million in funding to help create more shelters, build affordable housing and preserve existing affordable housing stock.

What's at stake: The living arrangements for thousands of Oregonians who are confronted by rising rents and a thin supply of housing they can afford. Moving people off the streets and out of cars makes it easier to provide social services to homeless people who have mental health, addiction and other challenges.

Key players: Kotek, state Rep. Alissa Keny-Guyer, chair of the House Human Services and Housing Committee, and state Sen. Shemia Fagan, chair of the Senate Housing and Development Committee.

MENTAL HEALTH

The issue: The Oregon State Hospital is struggling to accommodate an influx of patients from counties. Judges send defendants for treatment so they can participate in their own defense. In December, the hospital for three weeks stopped admitting other people needing treatment to make room for defendants.

The Oregon Health Authority wants \$20 million to add 50 beds to the hospital's Junction City campus. The move would add 94 workers and shift some patients to the new beds, freeing up space in Salem. Lawmakers may consider providing more money for mental health services in communities across the state. Rep. Andrea Salinas, D-Lake Oswego, is proposing the state evaluate the need for more behavioral health professionals.

What's at stake: The National Alliance on Mental Illness ranks Oregon as one of the states with a high prevalence of mental illness, and the state hospital has struggled to keep up with demand for its specialized services. Without more money, the state hospital could fall out of compliance with a court order and then face new lawsuits or penalties over inadequate care. Meanwhile, judges struggle to find places for those not requiring hospital-level care within their own communities, resulting in the release of people who need treatment.

Key players: Oregon Health Authority Director Patrick Allen; Oregon State Hospital Superintendent Dolly Matteucci; OHA Behavioral Health Director Steve Allen; Rep. Mitch Greenlick, D-Portland; Sen. Arnie Roblan, D-Coos Bay; Rep. Andrea Salinas, D-Lake Oswego.

WILDFIRE

The issue: Oregon could change the way it prevents and suppresses wildfire. The governor's Council on Wildfire is proposing better ways to plan fire suppression, assess risk and prevent fires. Gov. Kate Brown intends to ask for up to \$200 million over two years for the work.

Sen. Herman Baertschiger, R-Grants Pass, wants to modernize the state Forestry Department and expand its ability to use aircraft on wildfires.

What's at stake: Despite an average fire season last year, where about 16,867 acres burned, the growing threat of climate change has lawmakers and forestry officials feeling like they got lucky. Wildfire costs in 2017 and 2018 set new records. Such costs are expected to grow if the state does not spend more to prevent and mitigate fires, placing continuing strains on state budgets.

Key players: Jason Miner, the governor's natural resources policy advisor; Matt Donegan, chair of the state Council on Wildfire; Sen. Herman Baertschiger, Jr., R-Grants Pass; Sen. Jeff Golden, D-Ashland; the state Forestry Department.

GUNS

The issue: Democratic lawmakers are making another attempt at a "safe storage" gun control bill. Another bill would allow local governments to ban firearms from public buildings.

What's at stake: Advocates say their proposal is intended to reduce deaths and injuries in Oregon caused by guns. The legislation could also broaden the public buildings where guns could be banned.

Key players: State Reps. Rachel Prusak, D-West Linn; Janeen Sollman, D-Hillsboro; Oregon Firearms Federation; the NRA; Oregonians for Safe Gun Storage and Reporting Lost/Stolen Firearms; Moms Demand Action.

ENVIRONMENT

The issue: Democrats are pursuing limits on greenhouse emissions by industry in their latest version of a cap-and-trade program.

What's at stake: Scientists say the impact of climate change grows more distinct each year, and environmentalists contend Oregon needs to be a leader at taming damaging emissions. But opponents in industry and agriculture say new costs would harm employers and consumers.

Key players: Sen. Michael Dembrow, D-Portland; Sen. Arnie Roblan, D-Coos Bay; Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem; Sen. Herman Baertschiger, Jr., R-Grants Pass.

CAMPAIGN FINANCE

The issue: Oregon is one of a handful of states that don't limit donations to political campaigns. Supporters say major donors have an outsized influence on Oregon politics while opponents say campaign donations are a form of free speech that shouldn't be restricted. New limits could change Oregon campaigns because candidates would have less money to market themselves.

What's at stake: Voters will consider a constitutional amendment in November that would free the Legislature to regulate campaign finance. Legislation could be considered that would script new campaign limits if that ballot measure passes. Key leaders, including the governor, have backed away from pushing such legislation for now.

Key players: Sen. Jeff Golden, D-Ashland; Honest Elections Oregon.

Oregon public records council shores up support for independence

By Sam Stites
Oregon Capital Bureau

The state's Public Records Advisory Council rejected an attempt to restrict its independence Jan. 22. At the same time, the 13-member council said it would fight attempts to block it from proposing public records legislation.

During the meeting in Salem, the council showed its support for Legislative Concept 166, which establishes the council's authority to propose legislation and makes the public records advocate an independent member of the council. The concept is expected to become Senate Bill 1506 in the 35-day legislative session that begins Feb. 3.

Scott Winkels, a member of the council and a lobbyist for the League of Oregon Cities, proposed measure amendments to strike language dealing with the advocate's voting power. He also wanted the group to drop its plans to seek public records legislation.

Instead, the council voted to approve the bill as it was proposed. Members also authorized Chair Stephanie Clark and acting Public Records Advocate Todd Albert to propose legislation. Winkels was the lone no vote.

In addition, the council decided to advertise beginning March 9 for a new public records advocate. The council expects to review applicants and hire someone in April.

'Torpedo' proposed bill

During the debate, two members of the council — Les Zaitz, editor and publisher of The Malheur Enterprise and chief of the Oregon Capital Bureau,

and Steve Suo, The Oregonian's investigations editor — raised concerns that amendments proposed by Winkels' organization put the council in an awkward position.

"I'm uncomfortable having a council member presenting and promoting the special interest they're paid to represent," Zaitz said. "While it might be interesting informationally, it just strikes me as inappropriate. I'm concerned that going into a discussion of amendments that are not of the council's doing provides, frankly, a special entree to the council that other organizations don't appear to have."

Suo said it was disruptive to the process to have one member to try to "torpedo" a proposed bill the council supported.

Council member Mark Landauer, executive director of Oregon Public Ports, said he didn't view the league's amendments as an attempt to torpedo the bill. He saw them as a difference of opinion on the council's mission.

Winkels said the amendments were more about cleaning up "sloppy" language dealing with the council's authority to propose legislation, a constitutional right already available to the group. He also said the league did not agree that the public records advocate should be an independent office. The advocate's position was created in 2017 under the governor's authority.

"If the league doesn't feel like this is a good bill, we should be able to offer an alternative," Winkels said.

Limiting council's independence

During public testimony, Stayton City Councilor Jordan Ohrt said she

supported more independence for the council and the advocate. Former Public Records Advocate Ginger McCall, who resigned in September 2019, also opposed the amendments.

"One thing I'd point out to be wary of is that the language in the amendment says the council 'vet and review' proposals by others. Having that language in there could be interpreted as limited, so that the council is not placed or positioned to propose legislation on its own," McCall told the council.

Independence for the public records advocate and the council was particularly important because of the situation surrounding McCall's exit. In a letter to Brown last September, McCall cast light on disagreements she had with Brown's top attorney, Misha Isaak, over whether it was the advocate's responsibility to be a member of the governor's team or an independent authority.

"If the advocate were to represent the interests of an elected official while allowing the council and the public to believe that she is acting independently, that would be both unethical and particularly inappropriate for an office that was founded to promote transparency," McCall wrote.

Lawmakers created the office of the public records advocate in 2017 to increase transparency in state and local government. It also was designed to mediate disputes over public records. Brown proposed the advocate and the council as a way to increase state transparency after ascending to the governor's office when former Gov. John Kitzhaber resigned.

Measure to limit self-checkout gets nod from Oregon Supreme Court

By Claire Withycombe
Oregon Capital Bureau

Are they an annoyance? A convenience? Do they destroy jobs?

A federation of Oregon workers wants voters to issue a verdict on the self-checkout kiosks becoming more prevalent at grocery stores.

A petition to limit each grocery store to two of the checkout kiosks can soon move forward to signature gathering. On Friday, the Oregon Supreme Court certified the attorney general's description of the proposed measure.

Sandra McDonough, president and CEO of lobby group Oregon Business & Industry, challenged Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum's description of the proposed measure, asking the Supreme Court to review it.

Backers need 112,020 signatures to get to voters' ballots in November. Filed in July, Initiative Petition 41 is backed by the Oregon AFL-CIO, a coalition of labor groups representing about 300,000 Oregon workers.

"We have been consistently concerned about the impacts of technology and automation on

the livelihoods of working people, especially when they have no voice in how technology is used in their workplaces," Graham Trainor, president of the Oregon AFL-CIO, said in a statement. "You can see expansion of self-checkout machines in stores across the country and in Oregon."

He said jobs are lost as a result.

The AFL-CIO contends self-checkout kiosks make customers feel socially isolated, particularly elderly people, and that the kiosks let stores rely more on part-time workers and leaves workers "feeling devalued." They also claim self-checkout stands make it easier for minors to buy alcohol and for people to steal from stores. Joe Gilliam, president of the Northwest Grocery Association, an industry group, scoffed at the labor group's claims, calling the proposed measure "a bit perplexing and very misguided."

"Today's customer wants convenience and less hassle when shopping," Gilliam wrote in an email to The Oregon Capital Bureau. "This is evident in the growth of online shopping for local pick-up and home delivery."

He said that self-checkout allows customers check out more quickly and privately. He said presuming that self-checkout machines would replace workers is "simply untrue."

The measure would give the state Bureau of Labor and Industries enforcement power and let it issue penalties for stores that provide too many self-service stations.

In court documents, McDonough argued the proposed restriction would have a "substantial impact" on retailers and shoppers.

She argued that the ballot title wasn't clear that "virtually all Oregonians" could sue grocery stores that have more than two self-checkout kiosks.

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MOVIE SCHEDULE JAN. 31 - FEB. 6

BAD BOYS FOR LIFE (R)		
Action, Comedy, Marcus and Mike have to confront personal issues as they try to take down the vicious leader of a Miami drug cartel.		
FRIDAY	(4:00)	7:00
SAT&SUN	(1:00) (4:00)	7:00
MON-THURS		7:00
1917 (R)		
Two young British soldiers during the First World War are given an impossible mission.		
FRIDAY	(4:10)	7:10
SAT&SUN	(1:10) (4:10)	7:10
MON-THURS		7:10
DOLITTLE (PG)		
Starring Robert Downey, Jr. A physician discovers that he can talk to animals.		
FRIDAY	(4:20)	7:20
SAT&SUN	(1:20) (4:20)	7:20
MON-THURS		7:20
\$9 Adult, \$7 Senior (60+), Youth		