

Gov. Brown: Reopening Oregon will 'take longer than we want'

State joins California and Washington in pact on opening states' economies

By Dick Hughes

For the Oregon Capital Bureau

Reopening of Oregon businesses will occur "gradually, carefully and incrementally," Gov. Kate Brown said Tuesday, but she refused to say when that might happen.

"It will not be easy. It will take longer than we want," she said.

Brown and health officials held a press conference to announce her framework "for restarting business and public life in our state — how we're going to approach reopening Oregon" from the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We have to be cautious or it will backfire," Brown said. "We know that a vaccine or an effective treatment may yet be months away. And if we move too quickly, we will see a spike in cases that could lead to an

overwhelmed hospital system and unnecessary deaths."

Businesspeople and health professionals will be brought together to discuss how to gradually reopen restaurants, retailers, child care and personal services such as hair and nail salons.

"For example, this might include additional guidelines for reconfiguring the delivery of services with additional physical barriers like plexiglass dividers, or requirements for wearing PPE," she said.

She promised "a science-driven process" based on several conditions for reopening Oregon: slowing the growth of COVID-19 cases, having more personal protective equipment, increasing test capacity, establishing a robust system for tracking who has been exposed to the coronavirus and ensuring effective isolation and quarantine for people who test positive, including nursing home residents and homeless individuals.

The state's latest modeling estimates that, under current conditions,

COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations would remain steady through mid-May but would shoot up if those regulations were eased. Responding to questions, Brown would not specify a date for potentially relaxing business restrictions and social distancing requirements.

Much has yet to be determined. Brown said epidemiologists and her recently formed Medical Advisory Committee were working on the appropriate metrics for evaluating the state's progress.

The state does not know how much PPE is needed, including having sufficient gear for physicians and dentists to resume elective surgeries and other procedures, or potentially to protect employees in personal-service jobs.

More testing capability also is needed, enabling at least 15,000 Oregonians a week to be tested, according to Dr. Dean Sidelinger, state health officer. Not all Oregonians will be tested for COVID-19. And contact tracing of Oregonians will

require a vast number of workers.

As of Tuesday, 32,363 people had been tested in Oregon since January. The Oregon Health Authority reported that 1,633 of those had tested positive. Fifty-five have died. The total number of Oregonians with COVID-19 is unknown because many either were not tested or received inaccurate results.

On Monday, Brown announced Oregon is working with Washington and California on when to reopen the states' economies.

"We are announcing that California, Oregon and Washington have agreed to work together on a shared approach for reopening our economies — one that identifies clear indicators for communities to restart public life and business," the three governors said in a statement issued Monday afternoon.

The eventual lifting of social distancing and other interventions will require systems for testing, tracking and isolating individuals with COVID-19, according to Oregon

Gov. Kate Brown, California Gov. Gavin Newsom and Washington Gov. Jay Inslee.

They did not give a timeline. "In Oregon, the Governor's Medical Advisory Panel will be involved in reviewing the public health components of decisions related to the lifting of various social distancing orders," Press Secretary Charles Boyle said.

"While each state will have its own specific plan, our office is coordinating with the governor's offices in Washington and California to develop common criteria for this framework and a way for our health departments to coordinate on an ongoing basis."

Boyle said that reopening Oregon would happen neither overnight nor statewide all at once.

"Health outcomes will be the ultimate metric guiding decisions to reopen communities," he said. "We will only reopen Oregon if the data shows we can do so without jeopardizing public health."

Sen. Wyden calls for major overhaul of 1930s federal unemployment rules

By Peter Wong

Oregon Capital Bureau

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden says the temporary expansion of unemployment benefits to more workers — a step he championed and which became part of the \$2 trillion federal response to the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic — should be made permanent.

As the top Democrat on the Senate Finance Committee, which oversees the unemployment insurance system, Wyden negotiated not only a 13-week extension and a \$600-per-week increase in benefits, he also secured expansion of benefits to self-employed, gig and part-time workers, freelancers and independent contractors.

Although some changes have been made since the last economic downturn, more than a decade ago, the nation's unemployment insurance system dates back to the 1930s. Wisconsin created the first state program in 1932, and the Social Security Act of 1935 encouraged states to do so. All did by 1937.

Back then, typical U.S. wage earners were the men in two-parent families — and benefits replaced only part of their lost wages until they could get other full-time jobs.

Wyden, in an interview with Pamplin Media Group, said economic realities are different more than 80 years later.

"The unemployment system created in the 1930s has been in a time warp. I insisted that all of them (new worker categories) be covered, plus the \$600 per week and the four months of coverage," Wyden said. "I think this could be the foundation of a more comprehensive plan for unemployment insurance reform when we defeat this virus and we can go on to looking at policy in a more deliberate way."

Wyden's Oregon spokesman, Hank Stern, said the senator's immediate focus is on ensuring that unemployment benefits get into the hands of laid-off workers, no matter their category. Colorado Sen. Michael Bennet, formerly a Democratic candidate for president, also has proposed changes.



Eagle file photo

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, answers questions from Grant County community members during a town hall Oct. 7 at Prairie City School.

Almost 17 million unemployment claims have been filed nationally in the past three weeks, and 169,000 claims in Oregon the past two weeks. The sheer volumes have tied up state employment agencies — states run the system under the guidance of the U.S. Department of Labor — and the backlogs of claims are frustrating laid-off workers. There are no estimates available on the number of newly eligible workers.

Oregon's unemployment trust fund has about \$5 billion available, according to the Employment Department.

Change comes hard

The CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security) Act puts into effect some of the same proposals that Barack Obama offered in his final budget as president in January 2016, a year before Donald Trump succeeded him.

According to a statement then by Obama's top economic advisers: "With the economy in better shape today, it is a good time to prepare for future contingencies by making sure that unemployment insurance — one of our front-line defenses for workers who lose their jobs and a key automatic stabilizer for our broader economy — is more responsive to economic conditions."

But Republican congressional majorities took no action then.

According to an analysis by the National Employment Law Project, one of three groups that backed sweeping changes, only 30% of unemployed workers in Oregon actually drew benefits in 2016, slightly better than the national average of 27%.

"The workforce has changed and the nature of work has changed, but our system has not," said Janet Bauer, policy analyst for the Oregon Center on Public Policy, which advocates for low- and moderate-income people. "Fewer workers are covered by the regular program now and that number has

been going down.

"We know about the problem. The CARES Act goes in the direction we need to be going so that workers who have jobs today have protection when they are out of work. It provides the template for how we can think about restructuring the core of this program."

Bauer said advocates of change will have to come up with alternatives to fund the program, which now levies a 6% tax on the first \$7,000 of taxable wages of employees.

Even the temporary changes Wyden secured had to survive a showdown vote in the Senate — a fight that may foreshadow a future debate about whether the changes should be permanent.

Oregon did adopt some changes after the 2007-10 recession, such as a recalculation of the wage base for unemployment benefits and work-share programs. The latter allow the unemployment trust fund to be tapped for workers who are still employed, but whose hours have been reduced from the normal work week.

COVID-19 BUSINESS RELIEF HELP

Many financial Institutions and other lenders are offering payment relief programs or emergency loans, including SBA and USDA loan programs—Here are your local financial institutions' phone numbers and addresses:

Bank of Eastern Oregon

200 West Main

John Day, OR 97845

541-575-1862

US Bank

129 N Canyon Blvd

John Day, OR 97845

541-575-1530

Umpqua Bank

150 West Main

John Day, OR 97845

541-575-0257

Old West FCU

650 West Main

John Day, OR 97845

541-575-0264



U.S. Small Business Administration

