

Hundreds turn up at Oregon Capitol for #ReOpenOregon rally

By Dick Hughes

For the Oregon Capital Bureau

Hundreds of people turned up at the Oregon State Capitol on Saturday for a "#ReOpenOregon" rally.

People came and went during the rain, lining both sides of the street in front of the Capitol, which has been closed to the public for several weeks as a public health precaution.

Demonstrators held signs and waved American flags as vehicles circled the Capitol, honking their support. Some participants wore masks and maintained "social distances." Others gathered together.

A group calling itself Oregon Unit-

ing for Liberty organized the Salem rally, which was endorsed by the Oregon Republican Party and other organizations.

Signs included "Fear is the virus," "Freedom is bi-partisan," "My freedom does not end where your fear begins," "Unlock Oregon," "Fire Gov. Brown, reopen Oregon," "Boycott China" and "Gov. Brown, I went to church on Sunday. Please don't arrest me." Other signs supported President Donald Trump and Republican candidates.

"This isn't a partisan political event, but instead a public rally to rescue our livelihoods and freedoms from being extinguished by a government that has forgotten that, in America, government

must operate with the consent of the governed," party Chairman Bill Currier said beforehand.

"The shutdown in Oregon was intended to 'flatten the curve' of COVID-19 infections and prevent cases severe enough to need hospitalization. Unfortunately, it has been at the cost of damaging Oregon's economy and pushing many of our businesses, institutions, and activities deemed 'non-essential' by the Governor to the point of collapse."

Brown commented to Oregon Public Broadcasting before the rally: "I know folks are worried about how they're going to pay their rent, put food on the table and buy essentials for their families," Brown said. "I just would ask

folks as they operate their First Amendment right to free speech to maintain social distancing, wear masks and be considerate of others."

Medical experts say a gradual phase out of the stay-at-home orders is necessary to prevent rapid spread of the virus.

Statewide polling conducted by DHM Research in Portland has shown strong support for Gov. Brown's directives that forced many businesses to close and others to maintain social distancing.

In promoting the rally, Oregon Uniting for Liberty explained: "We assert that Governor Brown has unconstitutionally restricted our freedom of assembly, infringed upon our right to

freely worship, closed access to public lands, and prohibited businesses from engaging in commerce. She has deemed certain businesses 'essential' while refusing to allow other businesses to remain open even if they are able to implement policies or methods of operation that minimize the risk of spreading this virus. She has unilaterally issued orders that ignore the diversity of our state and denied localities the ability to do what is best for the citizens in their towns, cities, and counties. These orders are threatening the very freedom and liberties our Founding Fathers guaranteed to us in the Constitution — the same liberties guaranteed in the Oregon Constitution."

Gov. Brown: Parts of rural Oregon could reopen May 15

By Dick Hughes

For the Oregon Capital Bureau

Gov. Kate Brown hopes that some rural areas with few or no COVID-19 cases could start reopening for business and other activities as soon as May 15.

Brown held video conferences Friday afternoon with county and hospital officials in Central and Eastern Oregon to talk about testing, contact tracing and isolating of people infected with the coronavirus.

"Assuming these counties have these processes in place, that would enable us to safely and slowly begin the reopening process on May 15 for some counties — only if they meet all the criteria," she said during a Friday morning press conference conducted by phone and video.

Brown said criteria would be released soon for counties that have had more than five COVID-19 cases. All of Oregon's urban counties and some rural counties are in that situation.

"We're not going to be able to reopen Oregon quickly or in one fell swoop," Brown said, adding that Oregonians will still need to maintain physical distancing, wear masks in public and follow proper hygiene to prevent spreading the coronavirus. "Handshaking is probably out the window for a long time."

"I wish I could tell folks in Eastern Oregon that our lives are going to get back to normal. It is just going to be a different type of normal. And until we have a vaccine or we have medicine, we are going to have to be extremely careful regarding the virus."

The Oregon Health Authority and Brown's staff, working in consultation with advisory groups, has been drafting guidelines for how specific business sectors could reopen. As of Friday, medical, dental and veterinary facilities were allowed to resume



Ryan Brennecke/The Bulletin

A closed sign is posted in the front window of L & K Barber Shop in downtown Bend.

regular procedures so long as they followed those rules.

Brown announced what she said was a thorough strategy to diagnose those who have COVID-19 and to determine places where the coronavirus might be hiding. She said testing should be available throughout Oregon for anyone who displays COVID-19 symptoms, as well as to people in nursing homes, farmworker housing, prisons, fishing boats and other group living situations where the disease was suspected.

Public health officials will trace who came in contact with infected individuals. Anyone who did so will be asked to self-quarantine at home for 14 days.

In addition, Oregon Health & Science University will launch a year-long statewide study in which 100,000 Oregon are selected at random and asked to volunteer for daily monitoring. Invitations to volunteer will be mailed out the week of May 11.

"In order to reopen and hopefully stay open, we must have randomized, widespread testing across the entire state," Brown

said. "This program is a game changer. It will give us a more accurate understanding of the true rate of infection in Oregon and to have ongoing precision monitoring of any new outbreaks."

OHSU President Dr. Danny Jacobs said the data would help Oregon manage through the pandemic until a vaccine is developed. But he cautioned, "If we move too quickly in resuming our pre-COVID-19 lives, we put ourselves at increased risk of a secondary or second wave of infection."

Dr. Dean Sidelinger, the state health officer, acknowledged the risks.

"Our projections show that the disease will increase in Oregon as we open up, that more people will be hospitalized and even die," he said.

Brown said the state would be ready to tighten restrictions if COVID-19 surged. Key metrics include the number of people going to hospital emergency departments for COVID-19 treatment, the average number of new cases and hospitalization rates.

The state's major hospital systems — including Providence, Legacy, Kai-

ser, Asante, St. Charles and OHSU — have agreed that testing for the disease will be managed on a unified, statewide basis so every region has adequate resources. Brown said rural hospitals would be included.

Although the state has sufficient testing capacity overall, Oregon Health Authority documents show shortages in the central and southern Willamette Valley, along the central and southern coast and in some of Eastern Oregon.

Harney, Umatilla, Baker and Douglas counties have submitted letters asking the governor for approval to reopen. Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock said the Friday afternoon video conference with Brown left him feeling optimistic about a mid-May reopening.

"We don't think our businesses can last much longer. They're hanging on by a thread," he said.

Murdock said officials were still seeking guidance about the feasibility of large gatherings, such as county fairs and the Pendleton Round-Up. Brown said that information would be forthcoming.

State agencies to prepare for spending cuts

By Peter Wong

Oregon Capital Bureau

State agencies have been told to prepare spending cuts that may amount to 8.5% of their share of the tax-supported general fund in the next two years.

The proposed cuts, which Gov. Kate Brown has directed state budget officials to compile by May 8, would add up to just under \$2 billion. They also would be deeper than 8.5%, given that state government already is 10 months into its 2019-21 budget cycle.

"At this point, the reduction plans are a planning exercise that will give the governor a series of options to consider," said Elizabeth Merah, a spokeswoman for Brown.

Oregon's two-year budget from the general fund — largely personal and corporate income taxes that make up more than 90% — and lottery proceeds is \$23.7 billion. The state spends more, but federal grants are earmarked and other funds are restricted.

Tax collections and lottery proceeds are likely to fall far short of projections because shutdowns and curtailments linked to the coronavirus pandemic have resulted in worker layoffs and less business activity. Most Oregon Lottery proceeds are generated by video terminals, which are in bars, taverns and restaurants shuttered to the public.

The state's next quarterly economic and revenue forecast is scheduled for Wednesday, May 20.

"While we do not know the precise impacts of the forecast, we do know it will be a significant drop in state revenues," said a memo from Chief Financial Officer George Naughton and his deputy, Kate Nass. "This impact could be as high as a loss of \$2 (billion) to \$3 billion in state resources during the current 2019-21 biennium."

The most recent forecast had projected an ending balance of \$1.153 billion, but the request for spending-cut proposals now envisions a total of \$1.847 billion to cut. In practice, the ending balance is never zero, though in the 1981-83 downturn, it got down to \$3 million of a gener-

al-fund budget of just under \$3 billion by the end of the cycle in mid-1983 — and that was after the Legislature raised personal income taxes to balance the budget.

Potential offsets

The request for spending-cut proposals do not take into account some other factors:

- State reserve funds, which total just under \$3 billion, about 14% of the general-fund budget. Only the Legislature can tap those funds — a general reserve and a lottery reserve earmarked for education — and lawmakers are barred from spending all the money in a single budget cycle.

- Oregon's \$871 million share of \$150 billion that the federal CARES Act allotted to the states. The state total is actually \$1.6 billion, but it includes money for Portland, Multnomah County and Washington County — all with populations exceeding 500,000 — that they can seek directly from the U.S. Treasury. (Some local governments that fall under the 500,000 mark have urged Brown to give them a share of the state's money.)

But the law, and recently released Treasury guidelines, bar states from using the money to offset projected shortfalls — only to cover expenses connected with the pandemic. However, Congress is considering more aid to state and local governments in a future relief plan.

- Options affecting employee pay, such as salary freezes and unpaid furloughs. State budget officials said in their memo that recommendations would be considered on a statewide basis, not by agency.

Also, although the request by budget officials calls for cuts amounting to 8.5%, the reductions are unlikely to be across the board. The state cannot reduce debt repayments or some services mandated by law, although such services can be reduced to a specified minimum.

While Brown has the authority to cut across the board, only the Legislature can approve selective spending cuts. A special session for that purpose, whether called by the governor or legislators themselves, is likely to await the May 20 forecast.

On Brown's behalf, Merah concluded:

"One thing we do know: whether it's at the Oregon Health Authority, at the Department of Human Services, at our State Police or at the Department of Corrections, state employees are working many long hours to keep Oregonians safe and secure during this pandemic. In this time of crisis, Oregonians rely on state services more than ever, so cutting critical state services will be a last resort."

Limited exemptions

Although Brown has ordered a partial hiring freeze, it does not affect such agencies as the Oregon Health Authority or the Employment Department, which is raising the number of claims-processing employees from 100 to 800 to handle a deluge from unemployed workers.

Some agencies are exempt from the request because they fall outside the governor's budget authority. Among them: the Legislature itself, state courts, Oregon Lottery Commission, secretary of state and state treasurer, the latter two being independently elected officials under the Oregon Constitution. The Department of Justice and the Bureau of Labor and Industries, though led by elected officials, are subject to executive budget authority.

JOHN

LAMBORN

FOR

CIRCUIT COURT JUDGE

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