

Gov. Brown calls special session to tackle COVID-19 issues

By Gary A. Warner
Oregon Capital Bureau

After weeks of negotiations with lawmakers, Gov. Kate Brown announced a one-day special session of the Legislature will be held Monday to deal with COVID-19 related issues.

The need for state action has grown in recent weeks as Congress has failed to come up with a bill extending several key programs on unemployment, an eviction moratorium and small business subsidies.

Brown says she will ask for \$800 million to help Oregon residents who have battled a pandemic and one of the worst fire seasons in state history.

"Many Oregon families are struggling with unemployment, housing, food insecurity and paying their bills," Brown said in a statement. "We must protect Oregonians now, as we face some of our hardest days."

For the third time this year, lawmakers will come to the Capitol in Salem amid an epidemic that has only grown more threatening in the intervening months. Brown did not invoke a never-before-used constitutional clause that would have allowed the Legislature to convene from their homes, holding hearings and taking votes in an untested "virtual" session.

The remote Legislature provision was created to enable the Legislature to meet in the event of an earthquake on the Cascadia Subduction Zone, just off the coast, which would kill thousands and make communications and travel impossible. Since lawmakers could be among the casualties or unable to contact Salem, the Legislature would work under somewhat different rules. The normal two-thirds quorum of each chamber would not be needed. Using the catastrophic declaration was opposed by many Republicans because Democrats hold a supermajority in the House and Senate that allows them to pass tax and other revenue bills without support from Republicans. In the past two years, the only tool left to the minority Republicans was to walk out on sessions, thereby denying a quorum and bringing work to a halt.



PMG file photo
Gov. Kate Brown

Oregon and other state legislatures around the nation have watched as the Republican-led U.S. Senate and the Democratic-led U.S. House have been unable to reach consensus on relief legislation that must also be signed by President Donald Trump. Brown said the state still needs a massive infusion of federal dollars to head off financial collapse for many residents and businesses but, with just two weeks left until the end of the year, did not want to take the chance of hitting Jan. 1 with no plans in place.

"It is clear that states must act on their own to provide a bridge until federal help arrives," Brown said. "This is why I am calling on legislators from both sides of the aisle to come together in the best interests of the state."

The session comes as the coronavirus is spiking in Oregon and the rest of the nation. Over the past week, the state has seen an average of 1,320 cases per day, and will soon pass 100,000 cumulative cases of COVID-19. Deaths have risen 32% in the past two weeks, and are now at 1,168 since the pandemic began. The lawmakers will not be given doses of a new vaccine that arrived in small batches Monday. Inoculation requires two separate shots three weeks apart — no immunity could be built up prior to the special session.

The special session will be conducted with the Legislature elected in 2018. It will include several "lame duck" lawmakers who left office or were defeated in November, including Rep. Cheri Helt, R-Bend, and Rep. Tiffany Mitchell, D-Astoria.

Brown trying to resurrect projects killed by COVID-19 financial fallout

By Gary A. Warner
Oregon Capital Bureau

Gov. Kate Brown wants to resurrect more than 30 projects costing over \$200 million that died last summer when the state bond market collapsed during business shutdowns ordered to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.

Brown's 2021-23 budget proposal includes Oregon Lottery bonds set aside for projects in nearly every corner of the state.

There's dam work at Wallowa Lake and Newport, water system fixes in the Deschutes Basin and Hood River and health facilities in Umatilla and Jefferson counties.

The Oregon Coast Aquarium in Newport and arts facilities in Lincoln City and Beaverton are marked to receive millions for expansion and renovation.

Statewide programs would bolster affordable housing, historic preservation, redevelopment, levees and public works programs.

It's essentially a repeat of the lottery bond allocations approved by the Legislature and signed by Brown at the end of the 2019 session. The bonds were set to go on sale this past summer.

The steady flow of money into the state-run games of chance make the bonds attractive as a conservative long-term investment with relatively small return but a rock-solid record of paying off at the end of the bond's term. The bonds have performed well during economic booms and recessions.

But COVID-19 was what investors call a "black swan" — a rare unforeseen catastrophic event that upends economies, blowing away the usual rules and strategies of the

boom-and-bust market cycles.

When the pandemic ramped up in Oregon at the beginning of March, Gov. Kate Brown issued an executive order telling residents to stay at home and shutting most businesses, including bars and restaurants. The Lottery's points of sale are inside businesses and the shutdown cratered revenues as never before. At one point, Lottery sales were off by more than 90%. The state's May revenue forecast indicated a crippled economy with massive revenue deficits.

Oregon Treasurer Tobias Read announced in July that the lottery bonds approved in 2019 would not go on sale. The bond market required a 4-to-1 revenue to debt ratio on the sale and the hit on the lottery sales had sent its balance to just above 3-to-1. Without the sale, the projects were dead.

Virus deaths could claim thousands more before vaccine gets to most Oregonians

'We can't vaccinate everybody at once'

By Gary A. Warner
Oregon Capital Bureau

Despite the arrival of the first doses of a COVID-19 vaccine, Oregon will likely have thousands more casualties before the majority of residents can be vaccinated, state officials said Friday.

"We can't vaccinate everybody at once, so the sad truth is there will be more infections and more deaths," said Oregon Health Authority Director Pat Allen.

Allen said Oregon had been one of the best states in the nation at wearing masks, keeping social distance and limiting gatherings. Since the pandemic began in February, Oregon ranks 45th among states for infection rate per capita.

On Friday, Oregon reported 1,610 new cases, bringing the pandemic total to 91,421. Another 16 deaths were reported, with the death toll now at 1,138. Severe cases required 576 patients to be hospitalized as of Friday, up 70% from mid-November.

Allen said, if Oregon had the median infection rate in the country, there would be an additional 2,000 dead.

Dr. Dean Sidelinger, the state's top infectious disease expert, said statistics coming in are not showing a major spike over the Thanksgiving holiday.

The biggest news is the arrival of the first doses of a Pfizer vaccine for COVID-19. About 6.4 million doses will be sent to states based on their percentage of the national adult



EOMG/Ryan Brennecke
A sign near the entrance of the Sunriver Country Store details protocols Friday to help reduce the spread of COVID-19.

population.

Oregon is expected to receive 35,100 doses to be used as the first two shots needed from immunity. The state will then distribute the vaccine to nine unnamed hospitals that have the ability to store the medicine at the required -94 degrees to maintain its potency.

But even this hopeful news has been tempered by reports of production bottlenecks at Pfizer's manufacturing facility in Brussels. After promising in September to provide 100 million doses to the United States by the end of the year, it has cut that goal in half.

Currently, Oregon is assured of 147,000 doses of the Pfizer vaccine by Jan. 1. What happens after that time is unknown. The United States had a chance to pre-purchase another 500 million doses from Pfizer, but opted to take "options" for possible additional purchases. Other countries pre-purchased the stock of vaccines offered to Americans. When additional Pfizer deliveries resume is unknown, though it could be as late as June.

Allen said the pandemic has caused delays and shortages before, so he won't be counting his doses ahead of time.

"Until we actually see vac-

cines show up on the loading dock, I would not want to make a prediction on how long it is going to take," Allen said.

A second vaccine made by Moderna is expected to win federal approval next week. Oregon is slated to get just over 116,000 doses over the next three weeks.

Health officials' latest estimate is that Oregon will receive a total of 197,000 doses in December.

Both the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines require two shots spaced about three weeks apart. The current guaranteed shipments will be used to vaccinate the estimated 300,000 medical and care facility workers who come into direct contact with possible COVID-19 positive patients.

The next rounds will go to the older patients in congregate settings such as nursing homes and long-term care facilities, which have accounted for more than half of all deaths in Oregon.

Brown said the goal is to ratchet up vaccinations to 10,000 per day until the 2.6 million adults in the state who want the shots can get them. The current vaccines are not approved for children.

A state survey shows that

approximately half of all adults do not want to take the vaccine.

"Oregon is also one of the states where we are challenged with the number of folks who are opposed to vaccination," Brown said. "We have one of the lowest child immunization rates in the country."

The state will roll out an aggressive program to reach out to all adults and try to convince them to be immunized.

There are more than 55 other vaccines under development, with many already testing on humans. The increase in options for vaccines, as well as training more people how to give the shots, will eventually ramp up to the point that the state will knock out the virus as an epidemic.

"Thanksgiving and Christmas should look very different in 2021," Sidelinger said.

There is hope that more vaccines and more health workers who can give the shots could shorten the timeline so that enough Oregonians are vaccinated by June or July. But Allen said not to nail down any specific timeline.

"This isn't going to be forever, but this is going to be awhile," he said.

The Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center reported Friday that 70 million people have been infected worldwide, with just under 1.6 million deaths. The United States has reported just under 15.8 million cases and 294,144 deaths. The virus has been on a steep climb worldwide since late October. Infections nationwide are up 28% from two weeks ago, while deaths are up 48% over the same period.

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