

House OKs gun storage combined with partial ban on public places

Revamped bill heading back to state Senate

By Peter Wong
Oregon Capital Bureau

The Oregon House, on a largely party-line vote, approved a bill that combines storage requirements for firearms with a narrower ban on guns in some public places.

The 34-24 vote on Thursday sends the revamped Senate Bill 554 back to the Senate, which can vote to accept the changes — and send it to Gov. Kate Brown — or reject it and force a joint panel to negotiate the differences.

Support came exclusively from Democrats. Three of the 37 Democrats voted no: Paul Evans of Monmouth, David Gomberg of Otis and Mark Meek of Oregon City.

Opposition came largely from Republicans, mostly

from rural areas. Exceptions were from Clackamas County, where both Democratic Rep. Meek and Republican Leader Christine Drazan of Canby spoke against it. No Republicans voted for it.

Two Republicans were excused.

The vote took place after close to three hours of debate.

The bill does not have an emergency clause, which means that, if it becomes law, opponents have 90 days from the close of the 2021 session to obtain 74,680 voter signatures to force a statewide election on the law. The number is set by the Oregon Constitution, which specifies 4% of the votes cast for governor in the most recent election in 2018.

Part of the revamped bill proposes requirements for firearm locks and storage already written into a separate House bill, which the House sent back to committee.

Under the revamped bill,



Contributed photo/Dreamstime

Legislation to require guns be locked is still moving through committee. Other legislation has been sidetracked.

guns must have trigger or cable locks, be stored in a locked container or in a gun room. An offense is a Class C violation, which carries a maximum fine of \$500, unless someone under age 18 obtains access, in which case it is a Class A violation with a maximum fine of \$2,000. No jail time is imposed for violations.

The bill also requires prompt reporting of stolen firearms.

Its first sections are named in honor of Cindy Yuille and Steve Forsyth, who died on Dec. 11, 2012, in the Clackamas Town Center shootings. The assault-style weapon used to kill them was found to have been stolen.

The other part of the revamped bill narrows the scope of a firearms ban included in the original SB 554, which passed the Senate on March 25.

The changes would still bar

the estimated 300,000 holders of Oregon concealed handgun licenses from bringing firearms into some public places. State courts, which often are in buildings maintained by counties, already are off-limits to firearms.

But the scope of the ban would be narrower under the House version.

Licensees would be barred from bringing firearms into the passenger terminal at the Portland airport, defined as one with annual passenger traffic of more than one million. (Eugene and Medford airports had counts around one million passengers annually prior to the onset of the coronavirus pandemic.) Passenger boarding areas and firearms shipments in luggage are controlled by federal law.

Firearms bans would be optional at Oregon Health & Science University, seven state universities, 17 community college districts and 197 school districts if their governing boards impose them on buildings and grounds under their control. Notices of bans must be clearly displayed on buildings and grounds and posted online. (Bans would not apply to public sidewalks and streets.)

The revamped version of the bill drops the option for cities, counties and special districts to bar firearms from their buildings and grounds.

Offenses would be considered Class A misdemeanors with maximum punishments of one year in jail and a fine of \$6,250.

The bill also would raise initial filing fees for concealed handgun licenses from \$50 to \$100, and for renewals, from \$50 to \$75.

House passes bills to change policing

By Peter Wong
Oregon Capital Bureau

Five bills aimed at changing policing practices, plus four related measures, have cleared the Oregon House by near-unanimous votes.

All the bills go to the Senate. Five other policing bills, which are likely to affect state agencies, are pending in the Legislature's joint budget committee.

All emerged from the Judiciary Committee and a subcommittee focused on policing. It follows up the work of a 2020 special session called by Gov. Kate Brown after the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis last year. A former officer was convicted last week on charges of murder and manslaughter; three other officers are awaiting trial. Floyd's death touched off nationwide protests for racial justice, among them more than 100 nights in Portland.

Rep. Janelle Bynum, a Democrat from Clackamas who leads the full committee and the subcommittee, said lawmakers heard from local governments and associations of police executives and rank-and-file officers, not just groups advocating sweeping change.

"I want to make it clear this was not an opportunity to dig in and bash," Bynum, who is Black, said. "It was an opportunity to create a community table, where people around the state had a chance to have some input on who protects them and their communities."

Rep. Ron Noble, a Republican from McMinnville, a former police chief of that city and a former officer in Corvallis, said all the bills should be considered in context — not individually. He made his comments while speaking about House Bill 2929, which requires police

to report misconduct by officers or violations of standards.

"This bill by itself won't do anything," Noble said. "This bill, combined with the others that are coming before you, will create the ability and the safety for police officers to speak out when others act inappropriately, use excessive force, or just generally are unfit for the job."

Bynum spoke about the experience of Elijah Warren, who emerged from his home in East Portland to talk to police about the effects on his family of tear gas they used to disperse a demonstration on Sept. 5. While he did so, an officer struck him on the ear with a baton. The officer was found later to have been identified in other incidents of excessive force.

"Had officers not intervened, Mr. Warren could have been hurt much worse," Bynum said. "Had other officers reported the other officer's misconduct earlier, Mr. Warren may never have been struck."

Bynum said the city of Portland, as far as she knows, has not responded as to whether the officer was disciplined.

"What we do know from reporting is that when officers do not intervene to stop their colleagues' misconduct, it allows law enforcement to act with impunity," she said. "Whether it is before, during or after an incident, that is wrong."

House Bill 2929 passed, 58-0. It specifies who should receive reports of misconduct or violations (supervisors), when they should start investigations (72 hours) and when they should be completed (three months). If there is substantial evidence to support them, reports must be filed with the state Department of Public Safety Standards and Training.

Brown defends powers in virus crisis as Oregon tops nation in COVID-19 rate

By Gary A. Warner
Oregon Capital Bureau

Gov. Kate Brown said Friday that she has no intention of rolling back orders issued this week to fight the nation's worst rate of COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations now hitting Oregon.

"Cases are widespread, driven by new, more contagious variants," Brown said during a virtual press conference Friday morning.

The Centers for Disease Control reported Friday that Oregon has the highest rate of new infections and hospitalizations of any state in the nation. Cases of COVID-19 have risen 38% in the past two weeks, while hospitalizations are up 43%. Nationwide, both are in decline.

Fifteen counties already exceeded the extreme risk numbers at the very top of the state's four-tier COVID-19 risk chart. But Brown had ordered that the counties would not need to resort to the most severe restrictions as long as the state's hospital system was not overly taxed. She set 300 COVID-19 hospitalizations as the "tripwire" for restoring the ban on indoor dining and strict limits on activities and gatherings.

When cases topped 300 on April 26, Brown lifted the moratorium on extreme risk limits, putting 15 counties into extreme risk restrictions April 30. On Friday, the state reported 339 COVID-19 patients in hospitals around the state.

With early and sometimes heavy

restrictions, Oregon has one of the lowest case rates and deaths since the pandemic began spreading in the first months of 2020. Brown said decisions often had to be made pitting "lives and livelihoods."

"As your governor, I chose to save lives," she said.

Brown said more than half of state residents have been at least partially vaccinated. The first to receive the vaccine were elderly people in nursing homes, who made up more than half the deaths from COVID-19 in the state. While the daily death toll has fallen since its peak last winter, Brown said the current infection rate was rising too quickly and new variants that are more contagious and, in some cases, lethal meant the recent spike had to be taken as seriously as earlier outbreaks.

Brown's latest actions included extending her authority over public health by extending the emergency declaration she issued in March 2020 until at least June 28.

The orders to instigate the extreme risk and extend the emergency set off protests from some political and business leaders.

A Republican-led effort was started in the Legislature to initiate bills to curb Brown's powers or bar another extension.

A group of commissioners

from 27 counties, along with the Oregon Restaurant and Lodging Association, sent a letter Tuesday to Brown asking her to reconsider her order and instead give local governments more control to make decisions appropriate to their counties and cities.

"The time has come to allow our communities the opportunity to move forward while embracing continued health and safety precautions," the letter said.

Brown said she knew the pandemic had hammered small businesses, especially restaurants and bars, who have been whipsawed by closings, openings and restrictions for more than a year. A special \$20 million fund was being created by the Legislature to go to businesses that take a financial hit under the latest restrictions.

Oregon health officials have also struggled with "vaccine hesitancy" across the state from people unsure of whether they should get inoculated. But vaccinations have also become a political statement, with some counties in Republican areas reporting a dwindling number of people seeking shots.

Brown said supplies would be redirected to areas where there is still heavy demand. Lane County announced Thursday that it would receive triple the number of doses it had been getting each week. Walk-in vaccinations have also started sporadically, copying the statewide efforts in New York and California.

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