

# Rare cooperation on tax and housing speed Legislature closer to end of the 2021 session

Deadline to close session is Sunday, June 27

By Gary A. Warner  
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Back in January, the Legislature thought it would be adjourning for good on Friday.

Too optimistic. Mid-week, lawmakers seemed doomed to working right through to the constitutional deadline of 11:59 p.m. June 27, with maybe a break for Father's Day.

Too pessimistic. House and Senate members headed for the exits Thursday afternoon with a few hours of sunlight left to spare and word not to be back in Salem for floor sessions until Monday.

"They didn't really want to work on Saturday, either," Rep. Jack Zika, R-Redmond, said of his colleagues in the other party and other chamber.

Lips that are rarely zipped stayed shut as sheaves of bills and resolutions moved swiftly through the Legislature. The work was a late-session nod to the reality that bills cannot be amended on the floor of the House or Senate. It was either yes, no or send it back to committee, which at this point is the equivalent of no.

It also helped that on some of the contentious issues during what has been one of the most hotly partisan legislative sessions in recent memory, a middle path was cleared when a member of each party worked together to cobble a compromise that was palatable to a majority.

The 30-member Senate, the smaller and usually more sedate of the two legislative bodies, moved through its agenda in the time of a good baseball game in the days before television: Two hours and four minutes.

On Thursday, legislators ping-ponged between taxes, affordable housing, racial equity and mental health.

For most of the past decade, lawmakers have debated a 2013 tax cut meant to spur small businesses to hire employees but instead ended up as a popular tax-slicing tool of what critics called "suits and scrubs," or incorporated small operations that often include doctor and lawyer offices.



The House chamber in the state Capitol in Salem.

Oregon Capital Bureau file photo

The political rewind worked on Thursday because it was drawn up by two longtime senators who on most issues are at polar opposites. Sen. Ginny Burdick, D-Portland, the former Senate majority leader who has announced she is retiring, joined with firebrand conservative Sen. Brian Boquist of Dallas. A longtime Republican, Boquist had chafed under attempts by the GOP caucus to control his words and actions and officially declared himself an independent.

"The requirements we had in 2013 were pretty loose," Burdick said. "Most of the benefit went to the highest income earners."

Senate Bill 139 eliminates the tax break for businesses taking in over \$5 million in profits and puts a floor under the minimum number of employees that had to work for the company in order for employers to qualify. There's an offsetting slightly lower tax rate for businesses bringing in as much as \$1 million.

The 16-13 vote broke mostly along party — or what used to be party — lines. Boquist, the former Republican, voted yes. Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, and Sen. Deb Patterson, D-Salem, voted no.

While there weren't many surprises in the tally, the brevity of com-

ment was unusual. Besides Burdick and Boquist, only Sen. Tim Knopp, R-Bend, spoke at all.

Knopp, who like the bill's sponsors had been in the Legislature when the original bill passed, said he opposed it because Thursday's remedy didn't cure the original sin in 2013 of financing the tax break by changes to a senior citizen tax credit.

"I'm not happy about it now, I wasn't happy about it then," Knopp said.

Zika helped build a similar solution with House Bill 278, where he joined with Rep. Julie Fahey, D-Eugene, that extended eviction protections for tenants for two months past the current July 1 deadline in exchange for revising an earlier plan in which the state paid landlords back rent owed, but only if they agreed to take just 80% and forgave the rest.

It was the rare compromise that seemed to satisfy everyone, passing the House 56-0. The bill will have to go back to the Senate early next week for a vote on whether to agree to the landlord repayment plan added after long debate in the House Rules Committee.

Not all the action in the capitol was in the two chambers. Up on the second floor, Gov. Kate Brown was taking heat for a line-item veto of

the \$200 million the Legislature had taken out of the Education Stability Fund as part of a sprawling \$9.3 billion schools budget.

The move drew a harsh rebuke from Rep. Suzanne Weber, R-Tillamook, who used a time for personal comments on the House floor to lash Brown for agreeing to questionable deals on public campaign financing and assistance targeted at other sectors, but saying she was holding the line with the education funds.

She challenged the 60 House makers to decide if they were with students, teachers and parents, or with the governor.

"We cannot stand with both," Weber said.

In the east wing, the Secretary of State's Office announced the latest volley in the ongoing gun wars. The Legislature had already passed Senate Bill 554, which would have the effect of barring firearms from the Capitol and Portland International Airport, along with requiring locks on guns kept at home.

A group of conservative current and former Republican lawmakers had filed a referendum with the secretary of state that if it gains enough signatures over the next three months to put it on the ballot, would freeze the implementation of the law now

scheduled for September. Only after the November 2022 vote would any action be taken.

The Secretary of State's Office also said Thursday that notices of the intent to file two gun control initiatives had been received: "The Reduction of Gun Violence Act" and the "Reduction of Harm from Weapons Act."

Also received by the secretary of state was a notice from a Grant County resident of an attempt to recall Sen. Lynn Findley, R-Vale, who was among Republican lawmakers who were criticized for staying in the Senate to oppose and vote against the gun bill, instead of walking out to deny the 18 Democrats the two additional lawmakers needed for a quorum.

While the relatively bare agenda for the Senate and House on Monday and Tuesday gave an appearance of a light schedule, not everyone is going home for the weekend. The main budget writing committee — Joint Ways & Means — is reading and revising several large items, including the funding for university construction and other public works projects.

The House Rules Committee and House Revenue Committee will also get together in the Capitol on Friday to shuffle through the dozens of bills that are still on its calendar. Both panels are among a select few that are exempted from the multiple deadlines that cull bills from most of the more than 35 legislative committees this year.

The chambers' two rules committees could still pluck several dormant items to be brought up for a vote and sent to the chambers at the last minute. A development project at Stevens Road in Bend is one that is scheduled for the first hard look since it was introduced near the start of the session in January.

Most of the measures are expected to expire when the Legislature gavels out for the final time in the 2021 regular session — the exact date is still open to speculation ranging from as early as Tuesday to as late as the constitutional deadline on Sunday, June 27.

Whatever the expiration date, the slate of more than 2,500 bills — dead and living — will be wiped clean in time for the short session scheduled for early 2022.

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