

As governor, Kotek faces new task

By PETER WONG
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — As speaker of the Oregon House, Tina Kotek helped direct millions in the state budget to housing and homelessness, and mental health and addiction treatment — and also drive legislation.

As governor starting Jan. 9, Kotek will be responsible for making sure the money gets spent in the right places and the policies are carried out.

“It is a big transition from developing the policy and raising the money to making things happen,” Ed Blackburn says. “Sometimes it’s not as much fun to make things happen.”

“But I think she doesn’t have much toleration for failure.”

Blackburn should know. He worked for Central City Concern for 25 years, the last nine as its executive director, until his retirement at the end of 2017. The nonprofit agency helps homeless and low-income Portlanders find health care, housing and employment.

He interrupted his retirement to help Kotek, and was the first person to introduce Kotek as governor-elect when she appeared at a gathering at Salmon Street Springs in Tom McCall Waterfront Park in Portland.

Unofficial final results were due Nov. 16, but Democrat Kotek maintained a lead over Republican Christine Drazan, 47% to 43.5%; nonaffiliated candidate Betsy Johnson trailed with 8.6%, with almost 1.8 million ballots tallied. Drazan and Johnson have conceded.

During her appearance, Kotek specified her first actions:

“I will declare a homelessness state of emergency and work with urgency to help Oregonians move

off the streets. I will expand access to mental health and addiction treatment services. I will work to bridge the divisions in our state. I will spend time in our communities all over Oregon, working to fix problems and partner with Oregonians who want to find solutions.”

She also listed “successful schools” as a priority, but did not specify action.

Blackburn, in a short interview afterward, said Kotek understands the complexities of housing and homelessness — and how they intertwine with the need for access to mental health and addiction treatment.

“She is so focused that I think she has a great opportunity to be successful,” Blackburn said.

“I think she has a certain realism. When I talk about the problems of homelessness, she doesn’t go to the orthodoxy that everybody else wants to do. For example, I say a housing-first policy works for a lot of people, but it doesn’t work for everybody. When I talk to others, they say no, it works for everybody. When I explain to her why, she gets it.

“I was impressed by her ability to see a comprehensive picture and not being afraid to say we’ve got to fix the addiction problem and the mental health problem to be successful. They are symptomatic of several other problems.”

Starting off

Of 10 governors going back to 1959, when Mark Hatfield took office, Kotek is one of eight with legislative experience, but only one of three without prior executive experience in public office. (Republican Vic Atiyeh did run his family rug business before he was elected in 1978.)



Jonathan Levinson/Oregon Public Broadcasting
Tina Kotek takes the podium at the Democratic Party of Oregon’s election night event Nov. 8, 2022, at the Hyatt Regency Portland.

Among this group, Tom McCall is unique: He was an assistant to Gov. Douglas McKay from 1949 to 1951, years before McCall himself was elected governor in 1966.

Kotek also is one of four governors in this group — along with Democrats Bob Straub, Neil Goldschmidt and Kate Brown — to start their terms with party control of both legislative chambers.

Kotek will be only the second former legislative presiding officer to win the governorship in more than six decades. The other was John Kitzhaber, who was Senate president for eight years before his election in 1994.

“We have legislators who get elected governor and it takes them two years to figure that this is different,” said Jim Moore, who teaches politics at Pacific University and is director of public outreach for its Tom McCall

Center for Civic Engagement. Moore also is the author of a forthcoming book about Vic Atiyeh, who donated his personal papers to Pacific University, where Atiyeh was a trustee for years.

Kotek and Maura Healey in Massachusetts will be the first lesbians among the nation’s governors.

“I didn’t run for this job to be that first,” Kotek said at the gathering. “But I can tell you that being who I am is important to Oregonians across the state. Lots of young people have come up to me and said thank you for running and being who you are.”

Oregon will be the third state where a woman succeeds another woman as governor. The others: Arizona and New Mexico.

Other tasks

Aside from her policy priorities, Moore and Blackburn said Kotek has other tasks: Putting together her staff as governor, reviewing who leads state agencies and building public ties with Oregonians.

Kotek has named as leader of her transition team Tim Inman, a former chief of staff when she was House speaker from 2015 to 2018, when he went to the University of Oregon as secretary of its board of trustees and adviser to the president. She said one of the team’s tasks will be to review agency leaders, most of whom offer pro forma resignations when a new governor takes office. (Commissions, not the governor, name directors of some agencies.)

Kotek was critical of the Oregon Health Authority for its slowness in distributing money under a 2020 ballot measure to a network of mental health and addiction treatment programs. But among the three

major candidates, she did not call for a revision of Measure 110, which also decriminalized possession of small amounts of some drugs other than marijuana.

When Kitzhaber took office in 2011 for a record third term, he had vowed a wholesale change in agency leadership. Although only two or three were replaced immediately, Kitzhaber did replace almost every state agency leader by the close of that term in 2014.

“The key is going to be her bringing in good administrators to make things happen in Oregon,” Blackburn said.

Political healing

For years, Oregon has been split when it elects governors.

Democrats usually win in Portland-area counties — although Clackamas County often sides with the Republican, as it did with Drazan, who lives in Canby — plus the north and central coast and the counties that are home to the University of Oregon and Oregon State University. Republicans have generally won everywhere else. Over time, those margins have grown even larger. Harney County, the only one of 36 that went for the Republican in Kitzhaber’s second-term landslide in 1998, went for Drazan by 77%.

Moore and Blackburn said Kotek’s pledge to travel the state and listen to people will help her politically and policy-wise.

Moore: “She has to actively reach out to people across the state. It can’t be just talking to people on the phone.”

Blackburn: “She has a much better ability to convene people around the state to get things done. Her ability to engage people is very strong.”

Gov. Brown issues marijuana pardons

By ANDREW SELSKY
Associated Press



“NO ONE DESERVES TO BE FOREVER SADDLED WITH THE IMPACTS OF A CONVICTION FOR SIMPLE POSSESSION OF MARIJUANA — A CRIME THAT IS NO LONGER ON THE BOOKS IN OREGON.”

— Oregon Gov. Kate Brown

SALEM — Oregon Gov. Kate Brown announced Nov. 21 that she is pardoning an estimated 45,000 people convicted of simple possession of marijuana, a month after President Joe Biden did the same under federal law.

“No one deserves to be forever saddled with the impacts of a conviction for simple possession of marijuana — a crime that is no longer on the books in Oregon,” said Brown, who is also forgiving more than \$14 million in unpaid fines and fees.

Biden has been calling on governors to issue pardons for those convicted of state marijuana offenses, which reflect the vast majority of marijuana possession cases. Biden’s pardon applies to those convicted under federal law and thousands convicted in the District of Columbia.

In recent months, the governors of Colorado, Nevada, Illinois, Pennsylvania and Washington state have taken steps to grant pardons to those with low-level marijuana convictions, according to the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws, or NORML.

Several states, including California, Illinois and New Jersey, automatically review criminal cannabis convictions and expunge past records. In other jurisdictions, eligible persons must petition the courts for a review.

As a result of these laws, an estimated 2 million Americans had their cannabis-related convictions set aside in recent years, said Paul Armentano, deputy director of NORML.

“Our sense of justice and our principles of fairness demand that public officials and the courts move swiftly to right the past wrongs of cannabis prohibition and criminalization,” Armentano said.

In 2019, Oregon lawmakers passed legislation establishing procedures for people found guilty of low-level marijuana possession offenses to file a motion with the court to have the convictions set aside. Yet, to date, relatively few Oregonians have done so.

In Oregon, the pardon will remove 47,144 convictions for possession of a small amount of marijuana from individual records. Brown noted that removing these criminal records eliminates barriers for employment, housing and educational opportunities.

The pardon applies to con-

victions for possession of 1 ounce (28 grams) or less of marijuana when the person was 21 or older, where it was the only charge and where there were no victims.

“Oregonians should never face housing insecurity, employment barriers, and educational obstacles as a result of doing something that is now completely legal, and has been for years,” Brown said. She said people of color have been arrested, prosecuted, and convicted at disproportionate rates.

The Oregon Judicial Department will ensure that

all court records associated with these pardoned offenses are sealed, Brown said.

Oregonians passed a ballot measure legalizing recreational use of marijuana in 2014, becoming one of the first states to do so. In November, Maryland and Missouri voters also legalized cannabis but voters in Arkansas, South Dakota and North Dakota rejected it.

Maryland’s initiative came with a mechanism to erase convictions. By July 1, 2024, the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services must

expunge all cases in which the possession of cannabis was the only charge in the

case, and the charge was issued before July 1, 2023. Maryland and Missouri

joined 19 other states and the District of Columbia in making recreational marijuana legal.

REPORTER

At the Blue Mountain Eagle, we’re a small, tight-knit team that does big-time work: This year we took home five awards in the Oregon Newspaper Publishers Association Better Newspaper Contest, including honors for educational coverage, government reporting and feature writing.

Our goal is to continue to build on the Eagle’s long tradition of high-quality journalism. To that end, we’ve brought in a veteran editor to mentor and challenge our staff. And now we’re looking for a talented, energetic reporter to raise the bar even higher.

Located in beautiful John Day, Oregon, halfway between Bend and Boise, the Eagle is Oregon’s oldest weekly newspaper, with a proud history of community journalism dating back to 1868.

Here you’ll find loads of small-town charm in a historic mining community in the midst of reinventing itself with several exciting civic improvement projects. You’ll be surrounded by scenic forests and rugged mountains, with year-round recreational opportunities that range from hunting and fishing to hiking, camping, snowmobiling and horseback riding.

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