

Mail Tribune

Opinion

2017 Oregon Legislature: Session produced good things for rural Oregon

By Pam Marsh

Posted Jul 16, 2017 at 12:01 AM

On Friday, July 7, the gavel came down one last time to signal the end of Oregon's 2017 legislative session. It was the final moment of a packed, productive, sometimes disappointing and occasionally contentious five months in the Capitol.

From the first day of the session, much of our discussion, sometimes heated, centered around our perceptions of the differing needs between rural and urban areas of the state.

Here in Jackson County we sit somewhere in the middle of that polarity. While most of us live in the urban core, our county includes significant rural pockets. Our traditional reliance on the timber economy aligns us with other resource-dependent areas of the state, but the county has developed a much more robust economy than many rural communities.

Clearly, the rural parts of the state face economic challenges, including population loss, changing weather patterns, and the need for diversification, that require specific kinds of investment.

But when we look at the needs of families and communities, the rural vs. urban construct crumbles. Every Oregonian, rural or urban, needs health care, a family-wage job, good schools, and a sense of connection. Drawing artificial lines that force us to choose one side or another is a much less effective strategy than recognizing our shared values.

In the end, our work this session produced solid gains for the state's families and communities in many policy areas. In others, our efforts fell short.

Let's start with the very good news:

Health Care. When the Legislature convened in February, we were facing a \$900 million deficit in the state's health care budget, threatening coverage for one million children and adults served by the Oregon Health Plan. Thanks to a bipartisan effort that incorporated cost cutting and a provider tax on hospitals and insurance companies, we will preserve services for all who qualify — including roughly 50,000 Jackson County residents.

We also approved funding to ensure that all children have access to health care, regardless of citizenship status. Taking care of kids is the right thing to do. It is also far more cost effective to provide care than to have a child show up at kindergarten with chicken pox.

The final piece of the health care work focused on ensuring cost-free access to reproductive health care for women, regardless of citizenship status, ability to pay, or gender identity.

Transportation. In the waning days of the session the Legislature approved a 10-year, \$5.3 billion transportation package. The package utilizes multiple revenue sources to fund road and highway infrastructure, seismic upgrades, multi-modal projects, bike and pedestrian paths, and transit. A substantial chunk of new revenue will go to cities and counties for local projects; the balance will be allocated to projects of statewide significance.

Rogue Valley Transportation District will receive approximately \$4.5 million a year from payroll tax proceeds; the region will also get funding for seismic upgrades to ensure that traffic can move in and out of the valley in the event of a major earthquake.

Rural economic development. Recognizing the need to boost our rural areas, the Legislature invested \$5 million in a new Eastern Oregon Border Economic Development Region. We also extended tax incentives for rural medical providers, increased flexibility for rural enterprise zones, and approved specific targeted investments, including a tax credit to encourage employee training programs in Klamath Falls.

Justice system reforms. Renewed justice reinvestment funding will maintain and expand the state's community-based alternative sentencing programs. Additional reforms will implement sentencing flexibility for certain nonviolent

crimes to allow offenders, often women and frequently struggling with addiction or generational dysfunction, to maintain critical family connections while undergoing treatment.

Local diversion programs are much more cost effective than incarceration and may allow the state to avoid opening a new, very expensive women's prison.

Pay equity. Equal work should always produce equal pay. With the passage of House Bill 2005, the Legislature planted a clear flag, outlawing pay disparities based on gender, race, color, religion and other protected classes.

Of course, there were also disappointments:

Revenue. Despite months of discussion and negotiation, we fell a vote short of the supermajority required for fundamental tax reform. But problems with our underlying revenue structure are not going away. The tax reform debate will return — soon.

Environment. With approval of \$100 million in bonding, the 82,500-acre Elliott Forest will remain in public ownership. Unfortunately, other key environmental priorities, including clean air and climate initiatives, fell short. But the effects of destabilized weather patterns become more obvious every day. Environmental issues must top our list of action items in 2018.

— *Rep. Pam Marsh, D-Ashland, represents District 5 in the Oregon House.*