

The Legislature had productive session

July 5, 2009

If you like higher taxes, especially for businesses and wealthy Oregonians, give the Oregon Legislature an A+ grade.

If you think government is too big, give the Legislature an F-.

Such are the differing perspectives of the 2009 Legislature — praised by legislative Democrats as a "jobs" session and criticized by Republican legislators as a "taxes" session.

Overall, it was a productive session, especially on the Legislature's No. 1 responsibility: writing a balanced budget.

Budget No. 1

Several states began the new fiscal year July 1 without a budget. Not Oregon.

Our Oregon Legislature finished its work Monday night with a budget that should last — unless the economy slips more than expected or voters eventually overrule the legislatively approved income tax increases.

Like 41 other states, Oregon faced a severe budget deficit this spring. Legislators got to work immediately.

They rebalanced the final months of the 2007-09 budget, forcing furloughs and other cutbacks. They passed a \$175 million state construction and maintenance plan to pour bond money into the economy.

Then came a lull before the Legislature wrapped up the 2009-11 state budget.

That budget is a blend: deep cuts in some services; hefty boosts in construction and road projects; increased health insurance for children; a delay in implementing Measure 57; and a variety of tax and fee increases. Many of those actions were approved with bipartisan support.

Fortunately, some ideas went nowhere. For example, there was no need for Oregon to adopt a carbon cap-and-trade plan, because Congress and President Obama are tackling that on a nationwide basis.

Much to dislike

Whom to contact

You can write to Marion and Polk counties; state legislators at their office number at the state Capitol, 900 Court St. NE, Salem, OR 97301-4045. Or use their e-mail addresses:

Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem: Office, S-201; sen.petercourtney@state.or.us

Sen. Larry George, R-SHERWOOD: Office, S-307; sen.larrygeorge@state.or.us

Sen. Jackie Winters, R-Salem: Office, S-301; sen.jackiewinters@state.or.us

Sen. Fred Girod, R-lyons: Office, S-421; sen.fredgirod@state.or.us

Sen. Brian Boquist, R-Dallas: Office, S-305; sen.brianboquist@state.or.us

Rep. Kim Thatcher, R-Keizer: Office, H-472; rep.kimthatcher@state.or.us

Rep. Vicki Berger, R-Salem: Office, H-479; rep.vickiberger@state.or.us

Rep. Brian Clem, D-Salem: Office, H-284; rep.brianclem@state.or.us

Rep. Kevin Cameron, R-Salem: Office, H-390; rep.kevincameron@state.or.us

However, everyone will find something about the session not to like:

- The state stimulus plan got off to a slow start, and the resulting number of jobs is fuzzy.
- The Oregon School for the Blind will close.
- Drivers in Oregon will have to put down their cell phones and use hands-free devices, just like drivers in Washington and California.
- Environmental groups derided the massive transportation package as overly focused on cars and trucks instead of alternative transportation.
- The end-most-field-burning legislation is a blow to grass-seed growers.
- Democratic Gov. Ted Kulongoski didn't get the jobs program he proposed late in the session.
- State workers face the prospect of furloughs and wage freezes — but without the tax increases, the reductions would have been even worse.
- The majority Democrats ignored calls from business leaders and others to adopt temporary taxes. Instead, the Legislature went for permanent tax increases on higher-income individuals and corporate revenues, along with some shorter-term increases.

Taxes and voters

Democrats defended the tax hikes as bringing back fairness. Starting with the Measure 5 property tax limitation almost 20 years ago, the state's tax burden has shifted toward individuals and small businesses and away from corporations.

But the "permanent vs. temporary" decision could be the 2009 Legislature's undoing. It will give opponents more ammunition as they seek to refer the tax changes to a public election next year.

Expecting such an election, legislative leaders at the last minute tried to fiddle with the ballot rules so a "no" vote would mean "yes." A public outcry derailed that ill-conceived idea — and ensured that Oregonians would keep a close eye on the ballot language.

Many victories

Lawmakers did good work on promoting effective classroom teaching, which the Chalkboard Project has sought.

The Legislature also protected the Metolius River Basin, a cause promoted by Salem Rep. Brian Clem. It provided \$5.1 million for infrastructure development at the Mill Creek Corporate Center, thanks to the work of Salem Sen. Jackie Winters and other local legislators. It promised greater government transparency by creating a Web site where Oregonians can track state spending, a project championed by Keizer Rep. Kim Thatcher.

Much of that legislation didn't make headlines. Much was bipartisan. But ultimately, the 2009 Legislature will be judged on how well its decisions keep up with the economy.

Rep. Sherrie Sprenger, R-Scio:
Office, H-473;
rep.sherriesprenger@state.or.us

Rep. Jim Thompson, R-Dallas:
Office, H-388;
rep.jimthompson@state.or.us

Rep. Vic Gilliam, R-Silverton:
Office, H-389;
rep.vicgilliam@state.or.us

Rep. Betty Komp, D-Woodburn:
Office, H-273;
rep.bettykomp@state.or.us

Rep. Jim Weidner, R-Yamhill:
Office, H-387;
rep.jimweidner@state.or.us

INFORMATION:
www.leg.state.or.us