



A Message from Mitch

The Mitch Message

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The 2016 session of the Oregon Legislative Assembly began its work at an extremely fast pace. Each legislator was limited to two bills to be introduced and each committee limited to three bills. But the workload in some committees was heavy because of the limited time allotted for processing the bills under the rigid schedule required to finish our work in 35 days. That is all the time allowed under the constitutional amendment authorizing the annual session held in even-numbered years. The House Health Care Committee, which I chair, had 18 House bills assigned to it and only five sessions available to hear and act on any bills originating in the House. I decided to hold hearings on 15 of the 18 in our possession and will likely vote on as many as a dozen of those bills.

That made a very intense schedule for the three meetings we had last week, with as many as five public hearings scheduled for each 105-minute meeting. That left a fair amount of work needed to consider and vote on several remaining bills during the meetings next Monday and Wednesday. After next Wednesday we have a few meetings to consider any health bills passed off of the Senate floor.

The Judiciary Committee, of which I am a member, has also had a busy schedule. While there were 19 bills assigned to Judiciary, it had a slightly more leisurely pace because it is scheduled to meet four days a week, rather than the three-day per week schedule of the Health Care Committee.

While the committees were busy doing their work the political theatre was moving hot and heavy in both the House and the Senate. The issues were both symbolic and ideological. The Republicans in both bodies are quite disturbed over the majority's desire to move two or three pieces of major legislation during the short session. They are arguing very vociferously that the voters only intended the short session to balance the budget and deal with unfinished business from the previous long session. The Democrats point out that there are no such restrictions in the amendment itself, nor were those arguments put forward in Voters' Pamphlet statements arguing in favor of annual sessions

While the issue is being argued in the general terms it is clear that the minority is extremely concerned about the possibility of the majority passing two or three pieces of legislation they strongly oppose. The centerpiece of their concern is the Governor's proposal for increasing Oregon's minimum wage. There is the likelihood of two minimum wage initiatives being placed on the ballot this November unless the Legislature passes a more reasonable version. If passed the initiatives would go into effect immediately and would produce a statewide minimum wage of either \$13.50 or \$15 per hour. The Governor's proposal, which has been modified by the Senate, phases raises in over several years and produces different minimum wages in different areas of the State. The current proposal would by 2022 raise the minimum wage in Portland to \$14.75, in midsize cities like Eugene and Bend to \$13.50 and in most of the State to \$12.50. This proposal passed out of the Senate committee Friday afternoon and goes to the Senate floor for action next week.

The minority caucus in the House and the Senate are taking different tacks to show their displeasure and to slow things down in the two chambers. In the Senate they are periodically refusing to show up to produce a quorum. It takes 20 members of the Senate and 40 members of the House to comprise a quorum. The House minority caucus has taken a different approach. The Oregon Constitution requires that each bill be read on the floor in its entirety before the final vote on the bill. Traditionally there is a motion offered at the beginning of session to waive that requirement. It requires a 2/3 majority to pass. No Republicans voted in favor of that motion and it consequently failed. As you can imagine this caused some consternation, as bills can be very long on occasion. For example, one of my major bills, HB 2009 in the 2009 session, was 632 pages long.

In response, the Speaker announced the House would have evening and weekend meetings as needed to do the work of the House and asked members to clear their calendars to be available as needed. This week there were only a couple of long bills, and for each the Republican leader moved the rule be waived specifically for that bill. The Reading Clerk read the other bills in their entirety. Otherwise business progressed as usual without evening or weekend meetings. We are all anxious to see how it goes as more bills come to the House floor.

I was delighted that one of my two bills had a great first week. The bill, HB 4073, deals with the solemnization of marriages. When a couple wants to get married they get a marriage license. Then they get married. After the ceremony somebody must solemnize the marriage. Under current law solemnization can only be done by a member of the clergy, a judge, or a county clerk. This bill adds to that list officials of secular organizations; organizations that serve a function in the lives of people who are not religious that is similar to the function churches serve in the lives of religious people.

The bill was read and passed out of the House Judiciary Committee on Tuesday on a bipartisan vote. I carried the bill on the floor Friday. After it was read in its entirety, it passed without debate with 36 yes votes. While they made no objection to the bill in debate, all but two Republicans voted against the bill. A similar bill passed out of the House late in the 2015 session, but got hung up in the Senate Rules Committee, even though I had the votes to pass it if it were brought to a vote. I am hopeful it will have a better outcome this session.

I had the opportunity to take part in some very interesting political theatre in the Judiciary Committee on Thursday. The committee scheduled a hearing on HB 4147, a proposal to close the “Charleston Loophole.” When we passed the measures to require background checks for firearm sales we did not deal with a problem that occurs occasionally. About 3% of the time the approval or denial on a background does not come back within three days. Most of the time the response is completed within minutes, but when it takes more than three days the dealer is given discretion on whether to sell the weapon or wait for the definitive answer. This bill would prevent the sale of a weapon until the report on the background check is received. In the shooting where nine people were killed in a church in Charleston, South Carolina the killer had applied for a background check, which did not come back in three days. He got the weapon, which he then used in the shooting. He would not have gotten the weapon had the dealer waited for the final result.

The hearing room was packed with people waiting to testify in favor and in opposition to the bill. The meeting went nearly an hour late to ensure that everybody wishing to testify had their three minutes to make their point. There were about the same number testifying on each side. The most moving testimony was that of a woman who came from South Carolina to talk about the trauma resulting from the murder of her mother and her three cousins in that church shooting in Charleston. On the other hand, there was some pretty excited testimony from the opposition side of the argument. I was interested to note that most of the witnesses in favor of the bill were women and most of the opposition witnesses were men. Since the hearing I have gotten a couple of hundred spam emails from around the state opposing the bill.

As always I welcome email from my constituents. Because of the increased load it sometimes takes us a couple of days to acknowledge your messages. But I welcome hearing from you, so please keep the messages coming.

Mitch Greenlick