



A Message from Mitch

The MitchMessage

March 6, 2016 – The Session Summary

I have scheduled a town hall for March 14 at 7pm at St. Vincent Hospital, Souther Auditorium in the East Pavilion. This will be a joint event with Rep. Ken Helm.

Looking back at the 2016 legislative session brings mixed feelings. The short session moved along at breakneck speed. But, because of the limited number of bills each member could introduce I was only following the two bills I had introduced. In the long session I find myself chasing 30 or more bills that I introduce, testifying and meeting with colleagues to gather support for my agenda. Much of my attention during this session was focused on managing the agenda of the House Health Care Committee, which I chair, and studying bills to prepare for hearings and votes on bills in the Judiciary Committee of which I am a member.

When I was not on the floor or in committees I was swamped with meetings with advocates needing to see me to argue their position on bills scheduled to come before one of the committees on which I serve. Since I was in caucus or on the House floor from 10am into the lunch hour and in committee most days from 1pm to 5pm, the early mornings were filled with wall-to-wall fifteen-minute meetings. It felt like I imagine speed dating must feel.

The political theatre I discussed in my last *MitchMessage* carried on in both chambers. The Senate imposed the constitutional requirement that each measure was to be read in full before a final vote, including some that took more than six hours to read. It takes a 2/3 vote to waive this requirement. The Senate Rs kept that up until the penultimate day. In addition, they refused to show up for any floor sessions in the evening or on weekend days. The House Republicans gave up that tactic relatively early in the session, when it became clear that we were going to finish our agenda each day, no matter how long it took.

It turned out we were able to pass many, but not all, of the bills the Republicans felt were not proper topics to be addressed in the short session. The Democratic position was that we were elected to majorities in both chambers and it was our responsibility to try to solve some of the problems facing Oregonians as quickly as possible. In the end several of the bills to which the Republicans objected were passed. And most of those bills were compromised to reduce the objections and to gather the needed votes.

An example of a bill molded by the compromise process was a bill high on the Democrats' wish list, the minimum wage bill, SB 1532. Going into the session there were two potential initiatives that would raise the state's minimum wage --- one to \$13.50 an hour and one to \$15. Both would take effect immediately. The Governor felt either of those would cause significant difficulty and was determined to help produce a bill that would work better, but would also move the minimum wage to an appropriate level. She worked with business and labor representatives and with a bicameral and bipartisan group of legislators to produce a more reasonable alternative.

Republicans strongly objected to the bill that emerged, but it was much closer to an approach they could swallow. The bill changed the minimum gradually over six years and divided the state into three zones with a higher minimum wage in the Portland Metro area (\$14.75 an hour) and lower minimum wages in two less affluent areas of Oregon (\$13.50 and \$12.50). The bill passed along party lines and after furious debate in each chamber.

Everybody recognized that Oregonians were facing a housing crisis and that we needed to do something about it. We ultimately passed a four-bill compromise package. One bill (HB 4143) protects tenants renting on a month-to-month basis from surprise rent increases. A second bill (SB 1533) allows for developing inclusionary zoning, which would require developers to include some affordable units in developments of more than 20 units, all the while easing the definition of what is affordable. I voted for both of these bills. I did not vote for a bill in the package that would

facilitate pilot projects of affordable housing developments to be built outside of the urban growth boundary (HB 4079), nor did I vote for a bill that would require cities to annex, without a vote, parcels that land owners wanted to be annexed (SB 1573).

We passed a clean energy bill that was developed by major power companies in Oregon working with key environmental groups. It was a little hard to understand why that bill (SB 1547) caused such commotion. But it finally passed after some significant compromises. The power companies, as a result of these negotiations, agree to totally eliminate, by 2030, the use of coal in the production of energy they sell. In addition, the bill will move toward doubling the renewable energy use in Oregon over that time period.

The Health Care Committee continued to focus on ways to enhance the transformation of Oregon's health care system that we started as early as the 2009 session. We were particularly concerned with monitoring the work of the sixteen Community Care Organizations (CCOs) that provide integrated care services to more than one million members in the Oregon Health Plan. This Medicaid transformation project has reduced cost increases in Oregon and has provided access to care to people who were excluded for decades. We passed several key bills to regulate the process and an important bill (HB 4017) that charges the Department of Consumer and Business Services to produce a blue print to add "the Basic Health Plan" to our mix of available services. If we are able to get approval for such a plan from the federal government it would provide improved access to health insurance for people with incomes below 200% of the Federal Poverty Line.

I expect you have heard that Oregon is facing an opioid addiction epidemic, with opioid-addiction related death rate among the highest in the nation. There is a drug, Naloxone, that when provided to a person in a severe opioid overdose will instantly counteract the effect of the opioid. It is known as the Lazarus Drug because it literally brings back people from the dead. It is estimated to have already saved more than 100 lives in Oregon. We passed HB 4124 that will allow pharmacists to prescribe Naloxone directly to family members or others who want to have the drug available for emergency use. The drug was originally available only in an injectable form, but is now available as a nasal spray. It has great promise for saving lives in the future.

In my last *MitchMessage* I reported that my bill, HB 4073, had passed out of the House of Representatives. This bill was about the solemnization of marriages, which can currently only be done by religious officials, judges, or county clerks. It was designed to extend the right to officiate at weddings to officials of formal secular organizations. It passed out of the House with 36 yes votes, including two Republicans voting yes. But trouble began in the Senate. The bill was assigned to the Senate Judiciary Committee. The chair of the committee added an amendment to the bill that would also allow members of the Legislature to solemnize marriages. I was also told that the Senate President decreed the bill would not be brought to the floor if it came out of committee on a party line vote. I convinced one Republican senator to vote yes in committee, which allowed it to move to the floor. It passed on the floor on a straight party line vote, with the senator who voted yes in committee speaking against the bill and voting no.

The bill came to the House for concurrence and the Republicans went nuts. First, they came to the suspicion that the purpose of the bill was to allow sham marriages of underage girls to facilitate trapping them into the sex trade. Senator Thatcher made that claim in a remonstrance on the Senate floor. Second they believed, and I think this was the true issue, that the purpose of the bill by adding legislators to the list of people who could solemnize marriages was to create gotcha situations where gay couples would ask conservative legislators to perform a gay marriage and make a fuss when they were refused.

The Minority Leader came to the Speaker and demanded that we vote to "not concur." If we did not agree they threatened to do what the Senate had been doing and require every bill to be read in full on the floor. That would hold the House up until at least the Sunday deadline. I had conversations with six Republican friends asking them to get their caucus to back off, but they reported there was no way. The decision was made to move to not concur. That motion passed and the Speaker named a conference committee to consider eliminating the legislator part of the bill. As I was pretty sure would happen, the Senate President refused to name Senate members to the conference committee and the bill died. I have calmed down enough to consider trying again in 2017.

Which leads me to report that the interim provides time to begin thinking of the future. I have already filed for reelection, as the filing deadline is March 8. (One Republican opponent has also filed.) But the election will stay in the background, at least for several months, and my focus will be on creating my legislative agenda for the 2017 session and on guiding my Health Care Committee in doing its interim work. If you have suggestions I am always happy to consider moving them to legislation. Keep in touch.

Mitch