



# PRESS RELEASE

## OREGON HOUSE DEMOCRATS

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For Immediate Release

Jan. 4, 2021

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## **Confronting Oregon's Racist Past and Committing to a Truly Equitable Future**

SALEM, Ore. - Oregon House Majority Leader Barbara Smith Warner and Oregon House Speaker Tina Kotek issued the following statement:

"As elected lawmakers dedicated to building a future where all Oregonians can live the fullness of their lives, we must never forget that racism is threaded through the state's history and continues to undermine our present.

"From its very start, Oregon was founded as an anti-Black "white utopia." Black people were banned from the state in the Oregon Constitution, and the Oregon Territory itself is land stolen from the Native tribes who had made this region home for centuries. Through deliberate policies—from red-lining to forced displacement for "economic development"—Black families were literally robbed of wealth and kept from living in many parts of the state for decades. Today, gentrification, discrimination, and racially biased policing practices continue to deny Black families economic and physical freedom.

"These racist realities have long been manifested in the Oregon Legislature as well. The halls of the State Capitol are lined with portraits of governors and legislative leaders that are uniformly white, while the murals that adorn the chambers celebrate white settlers while ignoring the suffering, violence, and theft that was visited upon Indigenous and other non-white communities at the state's founding. And, while the progressive policies and practices that have been enacted in recent years are important in the effort to build an equitable future, the Legislature is still overwhelmingly white—in fact, the legislature is structured to make it very difficult for low-income workers, BIPOC individuals, and young people to even be legislators.

"Our colleague, Rep. Janelle Bynum, has been a leading voice in the Legislature for confronting and dismantling the structural legacies that have kept BIPOC Oregonians out of positions of power and influence. For years, Rep. Bynum has refused to accept the status quo systems of power in the state. We appreciate and support Rep. Bynum's ongoing leadership. She—along with other members of the BIPOC Caucus and other community leaders—has continually pointed out structural problems big and small that conspire to exclude diverse voices in the Legislature. We are deeply grateful for their work to make clear the moral urgency for action, and we are redoubling our efforts to tear down these barriers swiftly and completely.

"We are committed to confronting the past while taking steps to build a future that is more truly equitable—one that centers the needs of people who have been oppressed, discriminated against,

and kept out of the halls of influence for too long. In the near term, the Leadership of the Oregon House Democrats is embarking on these steps:

- Creating dedicated space for BIPOC House members on our caucus Leadership team.
- Launching a special legislative committee to propose reforms to the overall legislative structure that will encourage more diverse representation and engagement.
- Providing staff support to the bi-cameral BIPOC Caucus to develop their capacity and support their efforts.
- Providing language translation services in the Capitol so legislators can communicate with all of their constituents.
- Prioritizing the needs of BIPOC and other communities most impacted by COVID-19, the wildfires, and the economic recession, with an equity lens applied to both policy and budget decisions.

"Individually, these are modest steps. Taken together, and with an eye toward future bold ideas, we believe these actions will begin the process of transforming the Oregon Legislature and the decisions that emerge from it. We will be deliberate and intentional in the steps we take to confront Oregon's racist past, we will follow the lead of BIPOC leaders, and we commit to a brighter future for every Oregonian."

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