

Oregon News

POLITICS

Are Oregon's Top Democrats More Interested in Housing the Poor or Helping Their Campaign Donors?

Willamette Week | By Nigel Jaquiss

Six years later, the project, now called Copeland Commons, is still a dream. Part of the problem, Van Nostran says, is a state government that says it wants more affordable housing but places costly roadblocks in the way.

Kotek and the Legislature have indeed injected record amounts of money into affordable housing (see table, below). But with no objection from the governor, BOLI has been interpreting the prevailing wage rules law so broadly that developers are forced to pay above-market wages to build affordable housing for the most needy Oregonians.

The Oregon Journalism Project's reporting has found that BOLI, under Stephenson, regularly mandates that developers pay prevailing wage even when the law suggests many such projects are exempt from the requirement. It's also clear that developers have laid out a clear path to reform—and more housing—but their efforts have died an unceremonious death in the Capitol.

For Pastor Bill, the net effect is that 68 people—that's the number of units Copeland Commons would provide—will spend more time sleeping under the Riverwalk or in Astoria's town forest.

Kotek consistently says she's doing everything she can to increase Oregon's housing supply. To be sure, the governor has pressed to streamline zoning and permitting, freed up additional land, and convinced lawmakers to ante up more than \$1 billion in new funding for housing.

What Kotek—and Stephenson—seem unwilling to do is confront the power of Oregon's trade unions. Those unions understandably want their members to be paid as much as possible and to build their ranks through the apprenticeship programs that are part of prevailing wage law.

The law requires that developers pay health care, vacation, pension and apprenticeship benefits, and document them in a certified payroll filed with the state. That's great for workers, but developers say those requirements dissuade nonunion and smaller subcontractors from bidding for work.

Kotek, of course, won the governor's race in 2022 with the financial support of organized labor, including trade unions, who gave more than \$1.3 million of the \$30 million her campaign raised. Kotek declined to answer detailed questions for this story, responding instead with a statement.

State Sen. Dick Anderson (R-Lincoln City) served as vice chair of the Senate Housing Committee in 2023. Anderson, who still holds that position, thinks labor protected prevailing wage behind closed doors. "The unions killed it," Anderson says.

In 2023, Anderson and a Democratic colleague, then-Sen. Elizabeth Steiner of Portland, also co-sponsored a bill that would have exempted child care facilities in affordable housing projects from paying prevailing wage. It went nowhere.

This session, **Anderson** introduced a similar bill anyway. Early in the session, he told OJP he was confident the bill would at least get a hearing.

That hasn't happened. "It's dead," he said in late March. Anderson says he's met with trade union representatives to seek common ground. After all, he notes, if a project doesn't happen because of a BOLI determination, everybody loses.

"Union workers have a need for child care, too," he says. "I ask them, 'Is there a place we can agree?' But they won't give us anything."

Oregon's housing shortage extends beyond Clatsop County across the whole state. But **Anderson** says despite abundant evidence of that shortage, reforming the prevailing wage law to increase housing supply remains a nonstarter.

"We keep saying we have a housing crisis in this state, but we've yet to act like it," **Anderson** says. "We just don't want to take the extreme measures necessary to make progress."

When It Comes to Wage Law, the Color of Money Is a Gray Area

Willamette Week / By Nigel Jaquiss

In addition to their wish to include commercial space in affordable housing projects without financial penalty, developers say some basic parameters of Oregon's prevailing wage law are slowing housing production.

One of their threshold concerns: The law says if a project includes more than \$750,000 in public money and is not otherwise exempt, the developer must pay prevailing wage.

Developers note that this maximum has remained unchanged since 2007, while construction and labor costs, according to an industry index, have doubled in that time.

[Changing the Use of a Building Triggers a Hidden Cost](#)

Willamette Week / By Nigel Jaquiss

In Salem, nonprofit developer DevNW wanted to replace a shuttered church with 18 units of affordable housing. DevNW kept the church's exterior walls and built the new units inside.

BOLI rejected DevNW's request for a prevailing wage exemption, ruling in 2022 that the project "did not meet the definition of 'residential construction' because the project includes the renovation of a church building, which is neither an apartment building or a single family home."

[ODOT's Alternative to the Gas Tax Is Stuck in Neutral](#)

Willamette Week / By Nigel Jaquiss

First, the Oregon Department of Transportation's budget calls for spending far in excess of projected revenue. What's more, ODOT overrelies on revenue from the gas tax, which is vulnerable to inflation, greater fuel efficiency, and the rise of electric vehicles (whose owners don't pay the gas tax).

It's not a new problem, as Transportation Committee vice chairman **Sen. Bruce Starr (R-Dundee)** noted last week. Back in the 2001 session, Starr was part of a group that recognized ODOT would one day be in the spot it's in today: hostage to a tax that will become obsolete. That year, Starr and his colleagues formed the Road User Fee Task Force, which still exists.

Starr is focused on a significant portion of motorists he thinks should be enrolled in OReGO: owners of the 107,825 electric vehicles on Oregon's roads.

He notes an ODOT task force finding last year that EV drivers pay less to use Oregon roads than owners of conventional internal combustion vehicles. That may reflect a desire to subsidize electrification, Starr says, but it ignores the wear and tear that electric vehicles put on roads (their batteries are very heavy) and places an additional burden on conventional vehicles.

Starr says he's not sure when he and his colleagues will have a plan and the support to pass a funding package for ODOT, but he wants that legislation to beef up OReGO—and level the playing field.

"EV drivers aren't paying their fair share," Starr says. "I believe that they should, and we have a tool in OReGO that could cause them to do that."

[Oregon lawmakers propose food aid for immigrants ineligible for SNAP benefits](#)

KATU / By Vasili Varlamos, Sana Aljobory

Currently, lawful permanent residents, also known as Green Card holders, can only be eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) after a five-year waiting period. Even then, they can only be eligible if they meet all the other SNAP financial and non-financial eligibility requirements, with some exceptions. [USDA's Food and Nutrition Service](#) states that SNAP is not and has never been available to undocumented non-citizens.

Currently, about [62,000 Oregonians](#) are ineligible for federal SNAP benefits. It remains unclear how many would participate in a state-funded program and how much it would cost.

Opponents of this legislation say they do not want their tax dollars going towards non-citizens. During a public hearing on the bill, one individual said we already do too much in Oregon for non-citizens.

Several Democrats and even a Republican are supporting the bill. **Senator Suzanne Weber (R)**, who worked in the education system for 30 years, said that when students go hungry, they are unable to

reach their full potential. She added that she understands why some of her colleagues would be opposed to the bill.

"I understand the controversy around this legislation, particularly around the legal status of recipients," said Sen. Weber. "I acknowledge those concerns and remain open to working with every one of all political stripes who are willing to work to respect our laws, but also ensure that youth and the elderly do not find themselves going hungry. This doesn't have to be the last step. It can be the first step."

[Oregon bill restricting book bans in schools advances to House](#)

Statesman Journal | By Dianne Lugo

The Oregon Senate passed a bill barring teachers, schools and school districts from removing books solely because they contain content on a certain race, sex, religion or other protected class under Oregon law.

SB 1098 passed on an 18-10 vote on Monday. **Sen. Dick Anderson, R-Lincoln City**, voted with Democrats. The bill now goes to the House for consideration.

Republicans attempted to substitute the bill with their own version, but the motion failed along party lines. They said the bill would force families and educators through a bureaucratic process and strip communities of local control.

"We do not need to further complicate the process," said **Sen. Noah Robinson, R-Cave Junction**. "This will not help. This will hurt children."

A written statement by Robinson said SB 1098 would "handcuff" local school districts and parents, and force them to accept materials that may be graphic, violent or inappropriate.

Senate Republican Leader Daniel Bonham, R-The Dalles, said he was concerned about what is being presented to children "without supervision" and about taking away local control.

Bonham said he voted against the bill because he did not want to encourage libraries having what he called "inappropriate content" in their collections.

[Oregon legislature latest: Lawmakers consider state-wide flavored tobacco ban](#)

KOIN | By Lisa Balick

In an effort to try and curb teen vaping, Oregon lawmakers are considering a bill to ban flavored tobacco sales. That bill is expected to head to the Senate floor this week.

There are opponents to a flavor ban, including some lawmakers who said an outright ban goes against their rights as adults to make these purchases. Some retailers, especially convenience stores, said banning the products would hurt their business.

Supporters said they tried to get a similar bill through the legislature two years ago but the Republican walkout ended up leaving their bill among hundreds of others that stalled. SB 702 is expected to be voted out of committee and to the House floor for a vote later this week.

[An Oregon bill would allow more voters to participate in primary elections. Here's why lawmakers won't support it](#)

Oregon Live | By Carlos Fuentes

Oregon has more unaffiliated voters than Republicans or Democrats — meaning a significant chunk of voters can't participate in the state's partisan primary elections and ultimately have no say on which major party nominees end up on general election ballots.

Lawmakers this year could change that. Four House Democrats have sponsored House Bill 3166, which would allow all voters to participate in primary elections to choose two top candidates who'll face off in the fall election. Proponents say it is a critical step to ensuring that elected officials represent a broad swath of voters.

But the bill is unlikely to advance, even in a Democratic-controlled Legislature that has previously supported other proposals to expand voter access. The proposal has received little support among influential lawmakers, and top Democrats have expressed hesitation to support the bill.

[Oregon will keep law allowing children to be charged with prostitution](#)

Oregon Live | By Hillary Borrud

Children who are sold for sex in Oregon will continue to face the possibility of being charged with the crime of prostitution, after a Democratic House leader killed a [proposal](#) that would have ended criminal liability for kids.

Supporters of the proposal, [House Bill 3584](#), said it was time for Oregon law to stop treating children as criminals when they are highly traumatized victims of trafficking and sex abuse.

But opponents said prosecutors already treat sexually exploited teens as victims in practice and they argued that changing the law would take away a critical tool for law enforcement to go after traffickers. No children in Oregon have been charged with the crime of prostitution for at least the last year.

[With time scarce for schools to plan summer learning, lawmakers fast track funding](#)

Oregon Live | By Julia Silverman

Plans to spend \$82 million for summer learning programs in Oregon over the next 2 years and three months— including \$35 million for summer 2025 — cleared a key legislative hurdle on Tuesday.

The unanimous vote by the Joint Ways and Means Subcommittee on Education paves the way for approval by the full budget committee and subsequent votes in the House and Senate.

[Reading advocates want state literacy funds directed to teacher training, 'most neglected' schools](#)

Oregon Capital Chronicle | By Alex Baumhardt

As Gov. Tina Kotek proposes tweaks to the program — and asks the Legislature to approve \$100 million more grant funding in the next two-year budget cycle — some literacy advocates are asking that the state direct more of the money to nearly four dozen schools that have the highest needs and require grants be used to pay for training in the “science of reading” for all K-3 teachers and administrators across the state by the fall of 2027.

On Wednesday, Kotek’s proposal to tweak her bedrock literacy initiative — [House Bill 3040](#) — will get a vote in the House Education Committee. It updates the 2023 Early Literacy Success Initiative legislation so that schools could spend their literacy grants on training classroom assistants, not just teachers and administrators.

But advocates at Oregon Kids Read want the governor to go further. In a news release Thursday, they said they are asking Kotek and Legislators to amend the bill to direct 20% of the \$100 million grant funding to 42 of the state’s [‘most neglected’ schools](#).

In 2017, students in three LA-area school districts struggling to read sued the state of California for violating their civil rights by denying them a quality education. In a settlement reached three years later, the state agreed to allocate \$50 million to improve literacy instruction in 75 California elementary schools where students have the lowest literacy rates.

[Oregon Department of Education Cuts Programs After Federal Dollars Are Terminated Early](#)

Willamette Week | By Joanna Hou

The Oregon Department of Education is shutting down five instructional projects after the U.S. Department of Education terminated funds that would have helped teachers improve students’ literacy and math skills.

The suspended programs include developing a general instructional framework to help ensure equal access to quality instruction and the building of a math-specific instructional framework. (A literacy counterpart to the latter framework currently provides literacy materials and resources to educators.) The other programs affect literacy, a priority for Oregon Gov. Tina Kotek. They are the Oregon Literacy Practitioners Network, which allows literacy ambassadors to share best practices for literacy instruction with educators, and a collection of professional learning resources to help students in grades 6-12 catch up on literacy. The funding was also meant to help host regional in-person trainings for educators in partnership with education service districts to boost early and adolescent literacy.

[Father, attacked by son in mental health crisis, says changes to Oregon’s civil commitment laws are badly needed](#)

Oregon Live | By Lillian Mongeau Hughes

In those weeks, Padrow and his wife had been desperately trying to get their son help. But Padrow said it felt like Oregon's system, set up to protect the civil liberties of people in mental health crises, protected nobody. Not them. And definitely not their son, who is now receiving mandatory treatment at the [Oregon State Hospital](#) after a judge accepted his "guilty except for insanity" plea.

[House Bill 2467](#) would give a judge considering an order for civil commitment the ability to take into account a person's past threats of suicide or violent behavior. And an amendment set to be published ahead of Thursday's hearing would also allow a judge to consider whether a person might become a danger to themselves or others "in the near future." The idea is to give a slightly broader time horizon than the near immediate risk that many judges look for now.

This will be at least the fourth time since 2019 that lawmakers have considered changing Oregon's civil commitment laws.

[Oregon's proposed clean truck rules give manufacturers an off ramp from sale requirements](#)

OPB | By Monica Samayoa

Environmental regulators are proposing rules that would offer truck manufacturers a pathway to meet Oregon's medium- to heavy-duty zero emissions trucks guidelines — even if they don't sell an electric truck.

Officials say this would give the trucking industry time to develop more zero emission heavy duty vehicles while still following Oregon Gov. Tina Kotek's request to keep the rules.

Under the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality's [proposed Clean Truck Rules](#), the Oregon Optional Credit Program would provide credits to truck makers who continue to sell diesel trucks in 2025 and 2026. Those credits would offset penalties the truck makers might otherwise incur by failing to sell cleaner vehicles.

[State updates hazardous substances list to include harmful forever chemicals, begins rulemaking](#)

Oregon Capital Chronicle | By Alex Baumhardt

Oregon's list of regulated hazardous substances is getting its first update in nearly two decades with the addition of six "forever chemicals" known to harm human health.

The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality on Tuesday announced it would add six perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS, to the state's list of more than 800 regulated contaminants and begin creating regulations to limit Oregonians' exposure to them.

[Northwest outdoor nonprofits hit with ripple effect of federal funding cuts](#)

OPB | By Erik Neumann

But the Mt. Adams Institute is in trouble. About 95% of its operating budget comes from contracts with those federal agencies, where in recent months officials with the Elon Musk-led Department of Government Efficiency have frozen funding and laid off thousands of public employees. The Mt. Adams Institute now faces its own budget shortfall and sudden layoffs. Its plight is just one of many examples of how sweeping federal cutbacks are rippling through nonprofit organizations that do everything from trail maintenance to multimillion dollar salmon restoration projects.

[Oregon bridge replacement falling further behind, ODOT report says](#)

Statesman Journal | By Bill Poehler

At the current pace of repairs and replacement, the 2,781 bridges the state of Oregon owns will have to last 900 years before they are all replaced, according to the state's [2024 Bridge Condition Report and Tunnel Data](#).

[Oregon sues US Department of Health and Human Services, RFK Jr.](#)

Statesman Journal | By Anastasia Mason

The [Oregon Department of Transportation](#) said in the annual report that it has funding to replace about three bridges per year.

Oregon sued the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. on Tuesday over more than \$11 billion in cuts of public health grants allocated during the pandemic, saying ending the funding caused "irreparable harm."