

## **Oregon News**

### **POLITICS**

#### **In rare move, Oregon Democrats tap a Republican to dig into road funding**

*OPB | By Dirk Vanderhart*

As lawmakers search for money to prop up the beleaguered Oregon Department of Transportation, two of the agency's sharpest Republican critics have a potentially influential new role.

Last week, the Legislature's top Democrats put state **Sen. Bruce Starr, a Dundee Republican**, in charge of finding ways to force more accountability out of ODOT at a time when plenty of lawmakers suspect the agency has lost its way.

Starr immediately tapped state Rep. Shelly Boshart Davis — a trucking company owner and the top House Republican on transportation matters — to assist him "shoulder to shoulder" in that work. The duo are tasked with a powerful, but informal, assignment: figuring out whether ODOT really needs what it says.

"Our first instinct isn't to raise taxes," Starr said in an interview last week. "Our first instinct is, 'Hey, are we getting the most bang for the existing dollar?'"

Starr was still deciding last week whom he'd select to help him dig through ODOT's budget, and he didn't have a hard deadline for when recommendations would be ready. But he suggested the effort would have input from both Democrats and Republicans, and include experts from outside the Legislature.

"Maybe they've run large agencies before, maybe they've delivered mega projects in the past and understand how that should work," Starr said. "Because right now, from where I'm sitting, the Oregon Department of Transportation can't deliver big projects."

"In a situation where there's, according to ODOT, not enough revenue to meet all the needs, maybe they're doing some things that aren't core to their mission," Starr said. "That's part of this effort."

Starr has delved deep into ODOT before. In 2009, while representing Hillsboro in the state House, he helped navigate a major funding package for roads.

"Historically, transportation is one of those issues where folks put their shoulder to the wheel and try to find ways to work together," he said.

That was evident by **Senate Minority Leader Daniel Bonham's** reaction last week to Starr's new role.

"Turning to Republicans for help fixing this problem is the ultimate admission that Democrats lack the vision, creativity, and resolve to reform an agency riddled with mismanagement and misplaced priorities," Bonham, R-The Dalles, said in a statement. "But if Democrats are only looking for cover to justify another tax hike, we won't be their scapegoat."

Asked last week whether he agreed with that sentiment, Starr took a softer stance on Democrats, whose supermajorities in each chamber grant them power to pass new taxes on their own.

"Theoretically, they could do this on their own and just keep throwing more money into the agency," he said, "I don't think they want to do that."

#### **Oregon Republicans push to repeal statewide wildfire risk map**

*KGW | By Alex Jensen*

Senator David Brock Smith said he appreciates the governor taking this step, but "unfortunately it falls short of any substance."

Many homeowners — particularly in rural parts of Oregon — reported that their insurance rates suddenly doubled or even tripled after it was released. Some said that their insurers dropped them entirely. Other critics of the original map said that the risk designations were not entirely accurate or inconsistent, a critique that has remained with the current map.

Since the withdrawal, legislators passed Senate Bill 82, which prohibits insurance companies from basing rates on the maps. However, the law does not prevent insurance companies from creating and referencing their own wildfire risk maps, which has made it challenging for some people to secure policies.

Based on the new map, most of the land in Oregon is either in a moderate or high hazard area for wildfires. The only areas considered low hazard are more urbanized areas of the Willamette Valley from Portland to Eugene and parts of the Oregon Coast.

**Senator Noah Robinson**, who hails from Cave Junction in southern Oregon, said the maps were the wrong approach. He's introduced [Senate Bill 678](#) as way to repeal the provision in the 2021 bill (SB 762) that required the maps be created.

Bill sponsor **Senator Daniel Bonham** also opts for a more local decision-making approach to wildfire risk management, rather than a statewide risk classification system. This would be done through county classification committees made up of members from the state fire marshal and forestry agencies as well as a land owner within the boundary as a preference over a more one-size-fits-all state system.

#### [Lawmakers and Gov. Tina Kotek Try to Control Damage From Fire Maps](#)

*Willamette Week* | By Nigel Jaquiss

Republicans say the wildfire hazard map is causing panic for many rural Oregonians who fear a “high hazard” designation would be financially disastrous for them. In essence, homeowners contend, the map serves as a guide showing insurance companies and banks which properties to avoid—a form of rural redlining. (Oregon law prohibits insurers from using the state map to determine whom they will insure, but it is a public record, visible to all.)

“The map is riddled with errors,” says state **Sen. Noah Robinson (R-Cave Junction)**, “and insurance rates have skyrocketed, which is going to make it harder for people to get loans and sell property.”

#### [Oregon may require hospitals, schools and others to compost food waste](#)

*Statesman Journal* | By Tracy Loew

Oregon lawmakers are considering legislation that would require about 4,000 of the state’s largest food producers, processors, preparers and sellers to compost their [food waste](#).

It would apply to schools, hospitals, large restaurants, food processors and more.

The aim, its backers say, is to reduce methane, a greenhouse gas that contributes to climate change, produced when food ends up in landfills.

[House Bill 3018](#) also would require food products sold in Oregon to have simplified labels letting consumers know when food is safe to eat, to help reduce the amount of food households throw away. That could save families an average of \$1,500 per year, supporters say.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates 30% to 40% of food produced in the nation is wasted each year.

The legislation faces opposition from some entities that would be impacted, including the state’s hospitals, food processors and garbage collectors. They say Oregon’s composting facilities don’t have the capacity to handle the additional waste. Currently, 12 of the state’s approximately 50 composting facilities accept food waste.

The bill’s sponsor, Rep. Courtney Neron, D-Wilsonville said at a hearing Tuesday that she is working on an amendment to address some of those concerns.

#### [For Years, Oregon Counties Kept Excess Proceeds From Selling Tax-Foreclosed Properties](#)

*Willamette Week* | By Joanna Hou

That’s what Oregon House Bill 2096 and two companion bills are about. The bills follow a 2023 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in the case of *Tyler v. Hennepin County*. In 2015, Hennepin County, Minn., foreclosed on a condo owned by a 94-year-old woman named Geraldine Tyler because she had failed to pay \$15,000 in property taxes. The county sold the condo for \$40,000 and kept the \$25,000 in excess value.

Oregon counties now have to figure out how many property owners they owe money to, how much they owe the property owners, and how far they need to look back in time to find them. The Association of Oregon Counties gathered partial data last year (22 counties, including all the big ones, provided data). At least 172 properties would have qualified for a refund since 2018.

In Minnesota, lawmakers created a \$109 million fund in 2024 to compensate property owners whose equity the state had taken. Members of the Oregon work group think the number here will be less—perhaps more like \$50 million. But the state, not the counties, is likely to be on the hook because the counties were following state law when they kept all foreclosure proceeds.

#### [Oregon's payouts for wrongdoing grow; threaten solvency of state insurance fund](#)

*OPB | By Lauren Dake*

In 2023, [the state paid \\$40 million of state taxpayer](#) dollars to settle a lawsuit alleging “deliberate indifference” on the part of the Oregon Department of Human Services that allowed for sexual and physical abuse of four children by their foster parents.

But these payouts — many for state wrongdoing — extend across many agencies; there have also been multi-million dollar claims paid to the family of a prisoner who died at the Oregon State Penitentiary and several million paid to a woman who said working at the Oregon Bureau of Labor & Industries was a hostile work environment.

And some lawmakers are worried the money is running out.

“While it’s not a crisis, it has all the markings of one if it’s not dealt with very soon,” Rep. Suzanne Weber, R-Tillamook, told members of the Senate Committee on Labor and Business at a recent legislative hearing.

The money comes from the [state’s self-insurance fund](#), which different state agencies pay into. The fund is meant to cover risks like workers’ compensation claims and other liabilities. It’s also the legal expense account, tapped to settle or fight lawsuits across all state agencies. It is taxpayer dollars.

“I do not believe that we as members of the Legislature and those that are responsible for the financial safeguarding of the state of Oregon have an understanding of the state self-insurance fund,” Weber said. “Because if we did, I do not believe that we would have allowed it to reach this point.”

#### [Moving beyond addiction: In eastern Oregon, drug use often lurks in the shadows](#)

*Oregon Capital Chronicle | By Ben Botkin*

Oregon’s drug addiction epidemic, much of it fueled by fentanyl, has spilled far from the state’s urban population centers in recent years. In rural corners of Oregon, fentanyl use and addiction thrives, and often in the shadows, with people camping in forests or other isolated spots. That makes them difficult to reach, and even those in towns are often reluctant to seek help, feeling they should tough it out, despite their suffering.

Oregon Health Authority data shows that before 2020, when voters approved Measure 110 and decriminalized low-level drug possession, overdose deaths were relatively rare in eastern Oregon. But in 2023, with more than 1,820 drug deaths statewide, most eastern Oregon counties had overdoses, with 13 deaths in Umatilla County alone.

#### [Former Oregon House GOP leader will run for Senate GOP leader's seat](#)

*Oregon Capital Chronicle | By Julia Shumway*

Former Oregon House Republican Leader Jeff Helfrich will run for the state Senate in 2026, one of several expected campaign announcements as the state constitution bars Republican senators who participated in a 2023 walkout from running for reelection.

Helfrich, R-Hood River, announced Tuesday that he plans to run for the 26th Senate District, which runs along with Columbia River Gorge and is now represented by **Senate Republican Leader Daniel Bonham**, R-The Dalles. Bonham can’t seek reelection because he had too many unexcused absences during Republican senators’ six-week walkout over bills on gun rights, abortion and transgender health in 2023. Helfrich, who did not return a call from the Capital Chronicle, praised Bonham in a statement announcing his candidacy.

“He made the courageous choice to sacrifice his political career, standing firmly on principle for what he knew to be right,” Helfrich said. “I admire his leadership and tenacity and hope to honor his legacy as a statesman in the Senate.”

The Senate district is more reliably conservative than Helfrich's House district, which was one of Democrats' four top targets in 2024. Bonham won by nearly 20 points in 2022, while Helfrich won his 2024 election by just 3.6 points.

**Bonham didn't return a call and texted back "no comment" when asked about Helfrich entering the race.**

**Bonham and Republican Sens. Cedric Hayden of Fall Creek, Kim Thatcher of Keizer and Suzanne Weber of Tillamook** are all barred from running for reelection in 2026. Thatcher and Weber both represent districts that have been competitive in the past.

**[Fewer people left homeless shelters for housing in Multnomah County in 2024 than did the year before, report shows](#)**

*Oregon Live | By Lillian Mongeau Hughes*

A lot of people – 11,912, to be exact – stayed at homeless shelters in Multnomah County in 2024. That's more than in either of the previous two years, according to [a report released Friday](#) on the countywide Homeless Response System, the new task force meant [to coordinate a local, regional and state response](#) to homelessness.

But of those who left shelters, only one in five moved into a home.

Schoene agreed the lackluster results are a wake-up call for county officials about the importance of focusing on housing placements and doing a better job of serving Black people who are homeless.

**[Gun-abusing parents wouldn't be allowed unsupervised time with their kids under Oregon bill](#)**

*Oregon Live | By Aimee Green*

Oregon law currently allows judges to decide whether a parent who is accused of abusing the other parent by using a gun is allowed solo time with their children, a state representative told a legislative committee this week. A bill before the Legislature is trying to change that.

## **EDUCATION**

**[Oregon colleges and universities among beneficiaries of new research designation for smaller institutions](#)**

*OPB | By Tiffany Camhi*

Oregon is now home to eight colleges and universities ranked among the top research institutions in the U.S.

The classification system also introduced a new research category this year that aims to highlight smaller institutions, that may not have had research designations before.

**[Are Teacher Pensions to Blame for Poor Student Performance? Probably Not](#)**

*Willamette Week | By Joanna Hou*

The statewide Public Employees Retirement System has caused a stir in Oregon's public education system this winter, after underperforming investments in side accounts have forced school districts to reckon with how to pay off escalations in pension rates. PERS, always a hot-button topic, also makes a convenient scapegoat in discussions on why Oregon's spending on schools hasn't result in improved student achievement. Maybe, goes the thinking, those dollars aren't reaching the classroom? "PERS hasn't gotten a whole lot worse in the last five to seven years," he says, "so it doesn't explain why the test scores did."

But because pension obligation bonds have largely paid off until recently, school districts have not seen large swings in their PERS rates in the past decade. In 2013, according to actuarial valuation reports by the business management consulting firm Milliman, school districts in Oregon were contributing about 13.2% of their operating budgets to PERS (after adjusting for side account contributions, among other factors). While the percentage has ebbed and flowed, it hasn't moved significantly: In 2023, the rate was 15.41%.

"Despite the elevated PERS rates, they were able to hire more staff," he says. "We do have more adults in the building now than we did before, and we have fewer kids, and we have worse performance."

“We went from a bottom quartile state on spending per student to very close to the U.S. average over the course of a decade, which is a big lift,” Tapogna says. “That also happened to be a decade when performance falls off track. A bigger question than how much more should we be spending is, what on earth are we doing with the money we already have?”

## **TRUMP**

### **[Oregon workers fired amid Trump administration cuts to federal spending](#)**

*KATU | By Christina Giardinelli*

Some Oregonians received a tough blow over the weekend as they joined [thousands of probationary federal workers](#) nationwide that received the pink slip from the Trump administration.

The former Southern Oregon-based Forest Service technician said her boss had told her despite the letter's verbiage, her performance had nothing to do with her firing.

### **[Trump's cuts to federal wildfire crews could have 'scary' consequences](#)**

*Oregon Capital Chronicle | By Alex Brown*

President Donald Trump's moves to slash the federal workforce have gutted the ranks of wildland firefighters and support personnel, fire professionals warn, leaving communities to face deadly consequences when big blazes arrive this summer.

Federal agencies employed more than 17,000 wildland fire staffers last year, many of them in seasonal roles. This year, many of those workers had job offers rescinded — or had their transfers and promotions put on hold — just as they were set to begin onboarding and training for the 2025 fire season.

### **[Oregon lawmakers seek to make utility bills more affordable, transparent](#)**

*Oregon Live | By Gosia Wozniacka*

State lawmakers are working on [legislation](#) that would give Oregon regulators broader discretion in setting power rates, with the aim of making energy bills more affordable, reducing the number of bill increases and making utility costs more transparent for customers.

Sponsors said they are responding to Oregon's residential electricity customers who are reeling from a [series of rate hikes](#) that have sent utility bills up by nearly 50% in the Portland area since 2021.

### **[WATCH: Effort to freeze federal funds causes confusion in Oregon, Kotek says in KATU interview](#)**

*KATU | By Steve Dunn*

There's been a lot of confusion around the administration's efforts to freeze federal funding for states. Currently, a court order has placed a pause on the freeze.

### **[Oregon farmworker wins damages in unusual discrimination case after company hired foreign laborers](#)**

*Oregon Live | By Maxine Bernstein*

A federal jury has awarded a Madras man \$190,000 for emotional distress and \$17,000 for lost wages after finding that Oregon-based Cal Farms violated his rights by hiring temporary foreign workers over him, a qualified U.S. citizen, for seasonal field work.