

Oregon News

POLITICS

Kotek's Gift to Trade Unions Contradicts Her Own Agency's Analysis

Willamette Week | By Nigell Jaquiss

Gov. Tina Kotek issued an executive order last month that will make highway projects more expensive, reduce bidding competition, and benefit a relatively small number of workers—who happen to be strong supporters of hers—at the expense of many Oregonians.

Who says so? Kotek's own agency, the Oregon Department of Transportation.

The executive order is now the subject of fierce statewide debate that mirrors national disagreement over the benefits of PLAs. But what hasn't been part of the conversation until now is a 2022 Oregon Department of Transportation analysis of PLAs that contradicts the benefits Kotek touted.

First, PLAs result in fewer bidders. "There is a consistent trend: that of open shop [non-union] contractors not bidding on PLA projects," the report found.

Fewer bidders means less competition, which ODOT found leads to higher costs. "The PLA analysis found the inclusion of a PLA was strongly correlated with increased construction cost within the range of 10% to 20%," the ODOT report says.

The only thing in worse shape than Oregon's 8,000 miles of highways and 2,700 bridges is the agency's balance sheet.

ODOT's projected costs are running so far ahead of revenues that Strickler raised the prospect last year of laying off 1,000 workers, one-quarter of the agency's staff.

Kotek, a Democrat, won election in 2022 with the strong support of organized labor. (Trade unions contributed more than \$1.2 million to her campaign.)

Kotek's executive order followed a tumultuous year in which ODOT tried to implement eight PLA pilot projects around the state. Those projects included highway and bridge work spanning 12 counties. The projects' price tag: \$280 million, more than 40% of ODOT's budget.

Papé CEO Dissects Unworkable Electric Truck Mandate

Oregon Business & Industry

What's happening: On Jan. 21, the Oregon Legislature's Joint Transportation Committee held an informational hearing on the electric truck mandate. The hearing began with a presentation about the rules by Department of Environmental Quality staff. Following the presentation, industry representatives detailed the many ways in which the mandate simply isn't workable. The committee heard from a representative of Portland-based [Daimler Truck North America](#), an OBI member that manufactures Freightliner trucks as well as zero-emission vehicles. But the presentation all taxpayers should watch was made by Jordan Papé, president and CEO of the Eugene-based [Papé Group](#), also an OBI member, who explained the limits of current electric truck technology, the impossibility of DEQ's escalating sales mandate and, ultimately the price impacts it will have on Oregonians. The video to the right begins with Papé's presentation but shows the entire hearing.

Legislative Fix: Sponsored by [Rep. Shelly Boshart Davis, R-Albany](#), and [Rep. Ed Diehl, R-East Salem](#), and cosponsored by a bipartisan group of colleagues, [House Bill 3119](#) would delay implementation of the unworkable Advanced Clean Trucks Rules until 2027.

Why it matters: Oregon businesses have long complained about the tendency of Oregon regulatory agencies to adopt rules that, even when workable, create unnecessary and unreasonable costs and compliance burdens. Over time, such rules have made Oregon less desirable to businesses, which in turn has limited job opportunities for Oregonians and revenue generation for state and local governments. The Advanced Clean Trucks Rules are the epitome of this tendency.

Gov. Kotek's economic emergency order is callous for eastern Oregonians

Oregon Capital Chronicle | By Jim Doherty

Two years ago, Morrow County residents drove to Salem to meet with Gov. Tina Kotek's staff to discuss the nitrate pollution in the area's underground water. They asked that the governor declare a public health emergency to unleash resources to address the years-long crisis. Kotek finally responded — this month. She declared an economic emergency for the area, allowing the Port of Morrow to violate its wastewater permit and continue the practices that have destroyed the environment and lives. This was a callous decision and ignores the situation on the ground. Nitrate contamination in Morrow and Umatilla counties has led to miscarriages, cancer and other serious health issues.

It is fundamental under American law that you do not have a right to make money while harming another's property nor health.

Kotek came to our community a couple of years ago, promising change. She pledged to stop the pollution, to end winter discharges that flood our groundwater with nitrates. But those promises have been forgotten, replaced by an economic emergency declaration that prioritizes profit over people.

[**Oregon labor bureau prioritizes wage claims of lower-paid workers**](#)

Oregon Capital Chronicle | By Kaylee Tornay

That slow pace is because of the massive backlog that the labor bureau faces, for both wage claims and civil rights complaints that deal with discrimination in employment and housing. The backlogs are a long-entrenched problem within the agency, and the issue is taking center stage as bureau officials prepare to lobby lawmakers for a significant budget increase in the upcoming legislative session.

State officials don't all agree on how best to solve the problem. Some lawmakers have expressed support for Labor Commissioner Christina Stephenson's [request for nearly \\$18 million more](#), which will fund 72 new positions to whittle down the logjam. The proposal also has the full support of Gov. Tina Kotek, whose [recommended budget](#) released in December included all the positions that the commissioner asked for. But a new policy to investigate only the claims of lower-paid workers has drawn the ire of some lawmakers and workers.

"I have no idea how you say to somebody, to a steel worker, a truck driver, that your wage claim doesn't matter," said Rep. Shelly Boshart Davis, R-Albany. "Dismissing it wholeheartedly is, in my mind, completely unacceptable."

[**Hundreds of Portland city workers could strike next week**](#)

The Oregonian | By Shane Dixon Kavanaugh

About 200 Portland [municipal workers](#) are planning to walk off their jobs next week as months of contract negotiations between city leaders and a coalition of trade unions continue to stall.

Another 1,000 Portland workers, represented by the city's largest public employee union, could follow suit just days after.

The looming labor showdown comes as Portland officials grapple with what they say is a [projected budget shortfall of more than \\$100 million](#) next fiscal year, creating a significant obstacle for city and union negotiators to reach a deal.

[According to figures released by the city](#), Portland is offering the unions a combined \$19 million in wage and benefit increases above scheduled annual cost of living adjustments over the next three years. The two unions combined, meanwhile, have proposed about \$40 million in new wages and benefits, according to the city.

[**Oregon City Council approves estimated \\$4M fire department expansion**](#)

WQRF Rockford | By Tyler Sorensen

Oregon's Fire Protection District received permission from City Council to expand and renovate its fire station. The department estimated the renovation will cost around \$4 million, but will not be paid for by an increase in taxes.

[**INSIDE DOUGLAS COUNTY 1.27.25**](#)

KQEN News Radio

Live from Salem, State Senator David Brock Smith with an update on what is happening with the Oregon State Legislature.

EDUCATION

[Oregon math, reading achievement among the nation's worst, new scores show](#)

Oregon Live | By Julia Silverman

Pre-pandemic, Oregon students regularly bested those in other states or at least ranked near national averages on the National Assessment of Education Progress, the only standardized achievement test given to a representative sample of students in all states.

Post-pandemic data, including the 2024 scores released late Tuesday, tells a very different story.

Oregon fourth graders who were tested in early 2024 ranked second worst in the country in math and tied with 10 other states for third worst in reading. Eighth graders tested in the same time period, who are now halfway through their first year in high school, performed far below the national average in math but close to the middle of the pack in reading.

After COVID shuttered schools nationwide in March 2020, Oregon's mostly remained closed until spring 2021, longer than almost anywhere else in the country. The Oregon fourth graders who took the federal reading and math tests last year had the end of their kindergarten year clipped off, then spent most of first grade learning online, with sparse hours of virtual instruction.

But students have been back to in-person learning since fall 2021. And Oregon's 197 school districts shared more than a billion dollars in federal pandemic aid to help their students readjust emotionally and recover academically.

That money is now gone, however, and the state's children haven't caught up. Struggling fourth grade readers were further behind in 2024 than previous fourth graders, now in seventh grade, were in 2022, the federal tests found.

A full third of Oregon's then-fourth graders who took the federal test scored "below basic" on the math section, meaning that they could not complete foundational tasks like identifying whole numbers on a number line or locate the lines of symmetry in shapes like triangles and rhombuses. Nationwide, a quarter of students scored "below basic."

Progress is not impossible, Carr said. Some urban school districts, including Atlanta, bucked the trends. And in Louisiana, fourth grade students across all proficiency levels posted better results than before the pandemic; the same is true in Alabama in math.

Across both grade levels, one of the broadest predictors of how an Oregon student might score is their family income level, regardless of their demographic background. Students from low-income families had average scores between 25 and 31 points lower than students whose families were deemed financially stable. Thirty points represents roughly the difference between scoring "below basic" and "basic" or scoring "basic" versus "proficient" for one's grade level.

TRUMP

[Oregon leaders scramble to decipher Trump order on federal grant funding](#)

OPB | By Dirk VanderHart

Federal funds [account for around \\$38 billion](#) of Oregon's current two-year budget — nearly a third of spending. That includes a hefty amount of funding for the Oregon Health Plan, the state's version of Medicaid, which was a major focus on Tuesday as officials grappled with what the order would do.

But Kotek told reporters that state officials were unable to seek reimbursement for both Medicaid and Head Start services as of Tuesday, alongside several other programs.

She urged Oregonians needing medical care to keep their appointments, and said the Trump administration is saying Medicaid is not affected when the reality is playing out differently. "They say one thing and then they can't answer questions about what's actually happening here in Oregon," Kotek said. The White House said Tuesday that it expected the Medicaid reimbursement portal to be brought back online.

The state's top Republicans were slower to offer thoughts on Trump's order, but at least one said he was heartened by the move.

Senate Minority Leader Daniel Bonham, R-The Dalles, said the spending freeze is "all about making sure taxpayer dollars aren't being wasted."

"Pausing to assess how taxpayer money is being spent isn't just smart—it's necessary," Bonham said, adding that Oregon's budget has grown quickly while many state services are lacking. "Oregon should follow the Trump Administration's lead and take a hard look at its own budget."

[According to](#) the U.S. Governmental Accountability Office, the federal government spent around \$1.2 trillion in grants to state, local and tribal governments in 2022. It wasn't immediately clear Tuesday what proportion of Oregon's federal funds could be impacted by the order.

[Oregon's sanctuary status of little comfort to families who fear Trump's immigration crackdown](#)

KGW | By Blair Best

As of Tuesday afternoon, NBC News reported that U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, had arrested at least 4,829 people since Inauguration Day. For some perspective, the Biden administration averaged 282 arrests per day, based on the latest available data. Over the last six days, the Trump administration has averaged 753 arrests.

The nationwide crackdown is spreading fear among immigrant communities in Oregon that those who are undocumented, including families with children who have not been accused of any crimes, could be swept up in the process.

[Lawmakers from Oregon and beyond weigh in on Trump admin's freeze on grants and loans](#)

KATU

U.S. Sen. James Risch, a Republican from Idaho, said the pause was a good thing to allow for a thorough review of spending.

"Now that the agencies realize their programs are on the chopping block, they're running out of their cubbyholes en masse showing us information we've been trying to get. This is going to work, everybody stay calm, and we'll reduce spending," he said.

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, said his staff confirmed that all Medicaid portals were down.

He called it a "blatant attempt to rip away health insurance from millions of Americans overnight and will get people killed."

[What will the Fed do with interest rates and how will Trump react?](#)

Fox News | By Eric Revell

The Federal Reserve is set to announce its next interest rate move on Wednesday, which could prompt a reaction from President [Donald Trump](#), who recently called for the Fed to lower interest rates.

Members of the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) are expected to leave the target for the benchmark federal funds rate unchanged at a range of 4.25% to 4.5% – which would be the central bank's first pause in this rate-cutting cycle following three consecutive cuts that brought rates down from 5.25% to 5.5%.

Inflation has persisted in the economy despite easing considerably from the 40-year high of 9.1% annual inflation recorded in June 2022. The most recent reading of the consumer price index (CPI) came in at 2.9%, above the Fed's 2% target rate.

In a speech to the [World Economic Forum](#) last week, President Trump said that he plans to bring down the price of oil and, in turn, energy prices to address inflation – which he said should serve as the impetus for the Fed to cut interest rates.

[Research, inclusivity efforts at stake as Oregon college leaders respond to Trump administration orders](#)

OPB | By Tiffany Camhi

While the freeze on federal funding is now in doubt, following a [judge's temporary order out of Washington, D.C.](#), higher education leaders are looking closely at President Trump's latest actions to see how their institutions might be affected. The freeze on funding was intended to stop the flow of federal

dollars while agencies could review how those streams align with executive orders Trump signed governing diversity, equity and inclusion programs and the administration's other policy targets. Federal funding for research projects is a particular worry for the state's larger public universities, which receive millions of dollars in federal research funding each year.

[Oregon joins lawsuit while state officials scramble to respond to Trump order freezing federal funds](#)

Oregon Capital Chronicle

Oregon is suing the Trump administration after it ordered an abrupt freeze of many federal payments, leaving state agencies unable to access reimbursements for Medicaid and child care programs and sending state officials scrambling to determine the total effect.

The Trump administration's memo ordering a federal funding freeze said it wouldn't affect funding for Head Start, which sends about \$70 million a year to Oregon to provide preschool to nearly 10,000 kids in the state under the age of 5. Trump's press secretary evaded questions about Medicaid, telling White House reporters she would provide a full list later.

Kotek said Oregonians who receive health care coverage from the Oregon Health Plan and parents with children in Head Start or subsidized child care programs should continue as usual while the state government works to restore reimbursements.

The announcement to federal agencies stirred questions and worry and was on the top of Kotek's mind as she met Tuesday morning with city officials and staff as part of the League of Oregon Cities' annual lobbying day — an event that already focused on how cities and the state have been hurt by reduced federal funding for infrastructure.

She told city leaders she was frustrated by the federal government's lack of clarity, and that she was doing everything she could to figure out what was going on.

"I'm a little frustrated this morning because I'm hearing we've got money streams being gummed up and actually stopped," Kotek said. "That does not help anybody. I just want you to know we're on the case, and we are trying to figure it out, because as the folks in the local communities providing the services, you need to know what's going on, and we're going to do everything we can to figure that out."

The affected funding includes federal grants and programs meant to collaborate with states and tribes on wildfire prevention, home hardening and community wildfire resilience, and grants providing financial assistance to firefighters. Karl Koenig, president of the Oregon State Fire Fighters Council, said he was very concerned about the pauses in federal funding.

About 14% of Oregon's annual education budget comes from the federal government, amounting to more than \$1 billion each year.

ENVIRONMENT

[Siletz Tribe gets \\$1.56 million to reintroduce sea otters to coastal waters](#)

OPB | By Brian Bull

After centuries of overhunting by fur traders, sea otters have largely disappeared from the Oregon and Northern California coasts. But the Siletz Tribe is trying to bring them back with the help of a \$1.56 million grant.

[Microplastics are common in salmon, other iconic Pacific Northwest fish, seafood](#)

Oregon Live | By Gosnia Wozniacka

It's one of nature's healthiest wild foods, the backbone of a major industry in the Pacific Northwest and deeply embedded in the diets and cultures of Indigenous people in the region.

But it, too, has been altered by the world's ubiquitous plastic pollution.

Scientists in Oregon have now found microplastics — particles smaller than 5 millimeters from the degradation of plastic in the environment — in salmon and several other iconic Pacific Northwest fish and seafood species.

The tiny particles were lodged in the edible tissue of those species, meaning that humans are, no doubt, consuming the microplastics when they eat them, according to [a study by Portland State University](#).

“We have next to no evidence of health effects linked to microplastics in the human body,” said Linda Kahn, an assistant professor at New York University’s School of Medicine.

Still, it’s highly concerning that microplastics have been found in nearly every human organ and tissue and have the ability to travel, said Kahn, who studies the impact of chemical exposure on humans.

HOUSING & HOMELESSNESS

[Oregon Has the Nation’s Second-Tightest Housing Market](#)

Willamette Week | By Nigell Jaquiss

Much of Oregon, not just Portland, is experiencing a housing affordability crisis. EConorthwest’s data shows that half of all renters in Portland are “rent-burdened,” meaning they spend more than 30% of their gross income on rent. That’s tough, but the numbers are even higher for Salem (54%), Medford (55%), Eugene (56%) and Gresham (61%).

Seven in 100 homes statewide in Oregon are vacant, a rate 36% lower than the national average.

[Warming shelters open across Marion County, and Vancouver](#)

KGW | By Sabinna Pierre

As freezing temperatures grip the region, multiple warming shelters have been activated Sunday night to provide relief for those in need.

[Metro Says Washington County, Fretting Shortfalls, Has \\$91 Million Surplus for Homeless Services](#)

Willamette Week | By Anthony Effinger

For years, Multnomah County took heat from voters and from Metro, the regional government, for not spending its allocation from Metro’s supportive housing services tax, a veritable geyser of money that voters approved in 2020.

These days, Multnomah County is pushing money out the door. In a recent presentation, county officials offered a slide showing that they had spent \$96 million of SHS dollars in the first four months of the fiscal year that began July 1, triple what they spent in the same period last year.

[Oregon passed expensive legislation supporting renters facing housing crisis. Eviction cases are still climbing](#)

OPB | By Bryce Dole

In 2019, Oregon landlords filed more than 1,500 eviction cases each month on-average. In 2024, that number topped 2,300.

Still, a housing shortage and surging rental costs have pushed many people like her to the brink of homelessness. In 2023, eviction cases reached the highest total since at least 2011, according to a recent report from Oregon Housing and Community Services.

“People just can’t keep up,” said Becky Straus, managing attorney of the nonprofit Oregon Law Center’s Eviction Defense Project. “Even hardworking renters, who are maybe even experiencing wage gains, are putting all of that into their housing, because rent increases have largely eroded any of those gains over the last five years.”

Eviction cases rose sharply in the years after the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly after Oregon’s eviction moratorium and “safe harbor” law expired.

Increasingly, Oregonians working at hospitals, grocery stores, gas stations and restaurants are needing assistance because housing costs have priced them out of a stable life, according to anti-poverty groups. [Multiple studies indicate](#) that [vulnerable people](#) — seniors, women, farmworkers, people with disabilities and renters of color — are most at risk.

She says her homelessness state of emergency has prevented homelessness for 24,000 households, financed 2,800 affordable housing units and provided infrastructure for over 25,000 affordable and market rate housing units.

Kotek’s administration remains far behind a goal she set when she took office of adding 36,000 units a year. That’s proven through permit data. Local governments issued nearly 17,700 housing permits in

2023, [according to a federal database](#). Preliminary numbers for last year point to a similar trend: 13,179 permits were issued through November 2024.

"I have heard from some legislators who are like, 'Your homelessness package is quite large,'" she said. "I'm like, yes, because we're in a crisis. And it is improving. But we need to stay the course. If I had more dollars, or if the federal government wanted to give us more money for rent assistance, I would know where to spend it."

Republicans have criticized the governor's proposed budget and say her administration is not making progress quickly enough to curb the state's housing and homelessness problems.

Rep. Kevin Mannix, a Salem Republican, is proposing two bills this legislative session that would reform the state's eviction laws.

TECHNOLOGY

[General purpose AI could lead to array of new risks, experts say in report ahead of AI summit](#)

Associated Press | By Kelvin Chan

Advanced artificial intelligence systems have the potential to create extreme new risks, such as fueling widespread job losses, enabling terrorism or running amok, experts said in a first-of-its-kind international report Wednesday cataloging the range of dangers posed by the technology.

The International Scientific Report on the Safety of Advanced AI is being released ahead of a major AI summit in Paris next month. The paper is backed by 30 countries including the U.S. and China, marking rare cooperation between the two countries as they battle over AI supremacy, highlighted by Chinese startup [DeepSeek](#) stunning the world this week with its budget chatbot in spite of U.S. [export controls](#) on advanced chips to the country.

The report focuses on general purpose AI, typified by chatbots such as OpenAI's ChatGPT used to carry out many different kinds of tasks. The risks fall into three categories: malicious use, malfunctions and widespread "systemic" risks.

CRIME

[Portland police won't assist federal immigration enforcement, chief says](#)

The Oregonian | By Fedor Zarkhin

The Portland Police Bureau won't help federal immigration enforcement efforts in the city, Chief Bob Day said in a statement Tuesday that reiterated existing policy against cooperation with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

"I want everyone to feel safe and protected, which is why it is important to understand that the Portland Police Bureau does not engage in immigration enforcement," Day said. "Simply put, we have no legal authority to do so."

[Opinion: Move past rhetoric to find real solutions to public defender crisis](#)

The Oregonian | By Caitlin Plummer

According to state data, almost 90% of people facing charges in Oregon cannot afford an attorney. However, a 2021 study by the American Bar Association found that Oregon had just 31% of the public defenders it needs to uphold the promise of the constitution with "[reasonably effective assistance of counsel](#)."

Across the state, public defenders are desperately trying to meet a demand that their numbers simply cannot support. There is not a work stoppage, there is a documented workforce shortage.