Too much, too fast. That is the best way I can sum up the 2016 Legislative Session. A lot of significant issues were debated and voted on in a very short amount of time. I don’t believe this is what Oregon voters and lawmakers signed up for when they agreed to annual sessions in 2010. Around half of the 250 bills introduced ended up passing during the 32-day session. I worry there will be many unintended negative consequences because policies were not thoroughly vetted.

My biggest concern is the impact on Southern Oregon’s economy as a result of the increases in minimum wage adopted in Senate Bill 1532. Both Josephine and Jackson counties were put in the middle tier which will raise the minimum wage to $13.50 by 2022. Several local business owners say this new law could prompt them to increase prices, cut employee hours and lay off workers. I fear that among those hurt the worst will be our fixed income seniors as well as high school and university students. I spoke out on the floor of the House numerous times urging my colleagues to put this issue on the ballot and let Oregonians have a say on minimum wage. Unfortunately, the majority party decided to bypass voters and have it their way. The State Bureau of Labor website has more information about the new law and the minimum wage rates by region.

The news wasn’t all bad coming out of the capitol from the short session. I was able to work with a couple of my colleagues to get two minor but important measures enacted. The first was House Bill 4080 which creates a new Governor’s Child Foster Care Advisory Commission. Over 7,500 Oregon children are in foster care every day and with news headlines talking about cases of abuse, it’s time the Governor and legislators had a group of foster parents, advocates, legal experts and others advising them on improving the system. I also helped get
Senate Bill 1515 approved which calls for tighter licensing rules for foster care providers and enhances accountability at the state child welfare agency.

Affordable housing was another hot topic this session. One bill I managed to get passed was a small but valuable step forward in dealing with a much larger problem facing our state. House Bill 4079 directs the state land use agency to write rules for pilot programs in two areas of the state, one in a city over 25,000 population, and one under 25,000. Each city would be allowed to expand their Urban Growth Boundary by up to 50 acres if a developer voluntarily agreed to build affordable housing as part of the pilot project. The site could not be on valuable farmland and would have to be near public services.

Here is a link to an interview I did with Charter Communications Local Edition Northwest toward the end of session where I discussed many of my views about the issues. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DSK-kqOjtY&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DSK-kqOjtY&feature=youtu.be)

While I’m concerned about the fall-out from some of the things the legislature did during this year’s session, there may be more troubling times ahead for our state. As a member of the legislative budget committee on human services I know we have holes in the state budget to fill that are in the hundreds of millions of dollars. That could mean significant cuts to programs for our most vulnerable citizens, schools, prisons, and other important services. I look forward to hearing your ideas for how we can make our state government work better for everyone so we can hopefully avoid these kinds of outcomes.

Sincerely,

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Pictured left, Representative Stark listens to concerned foster parents and others at a Foster Care Town Hall in Central Point last fall that he helped organize along with State Senator Chip Shields from Portland, the Jackson County Foster Parent Association and the Oregon Foster Parent Association.

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