

The 2021 session of the Legislative Assembly was perhaps the most unusual ever. Throughout the session, the Capitol was closed to the public. Legislative hearings and committee meetings were conducted virtually. Floor sessions were originally scheduled so that each house met on a different day, and the “floor” of the House of Representatives had to be redefined in the rules so that all members could be present on the floor when it was time to act, according to Representative John Lively (D-Springfield). As the session neared its end, some of the restrictions were relaxed and both the House and the Senate could meet in the Capitol on the same day. Legislative activity was down; only about 40 percent of the normal number of bills were considered.

Senator Lee Beyer (D-Springfield) pointed out that there did turn out to be at least one advantage to conducting hearings and committee meetings remotely – ordinary Oregonians had as much access to legislators as lobbyists and it was much easier for them to participate in the process since they did not have to drive to Salem. He said he expected some part of those changes to become permanent in future sessions of the Legislature even after all restrictions on meeting disappear.



Rep. Lively pointed to several areas where he saw accomplishments, although he noted that the effect of many of the changes won't be seen until at least next year. He noted changes to the rules on how to apply the cost of unemployment insurance to save businesses costs from the pandemic as well as legislation offering rent relief. He said the Legislature dedicated \$200 million in marijuana tax revenue to supporting behavioral health measures. He cautioned that while this

year adequate revenue probably exists, in future years that action may be a drain on the General Fund. He said \$350 million had been appropriated to communities to provide access to behavioral health services, but that there remains a shortage of qualified workers. Sen. Beyer praised those improvements, noting that if behavioral health issues are treated in the community, the federal government will pay for 50 percent of the cost, but for Treatment in the State hospital they will pay nothing. The Legislature also appropriated \$530 million to address housing affordability, \$200 million to wildfire risk reduction, all because revenues this year were much greater than normal because of an infusion of federal pandemic related funding.

Sen. Beyer pointed to three bills he said were important. One would force private utilities to move all electricity generation to clean sources by 2040, a second would require producers to assume, over time, about one-third of the cost of recycling and a third would build out the base of charging infrastructure to serve electric vehicles. He said there will be a major shift to EVs over the next decade, not because of policy choices by the Legislature, but because that is where the auto industry is moving.

Rep. Lively agreed that with a shift of more remote participation in the legislative process, the ability to support rural broadband becomes even more critical. While the legislative goal is to assure that every school has high speed broadband, it is probably unfeasible to extend fiber optic cable to every part of the state.” We have to get the technology right,” he said, adding that the technology is changing faster than it can be installed. Sen. Beyer pointed to the Starlink service, which consists of many low orbit satellites as one private sector technology that may be better than running cable. He urged the public to think of this task in the same way the nation thought of rural electrification in the 1930s. The concept is the everyone should be able to pay the same rate, no matter where they lived.

Rep. Lively said that the legislature combined the two departments that oversee childcare issues in an effort to make the support for those services more efficient. He said there is substantial federal money to support childcare but that there simply are not enough facilities and an inadequate and underpaid workforce.

When asked about redistricting and the addition of a new congressional seat for Oregon, both legislators said that the State would use a process similar to that used in 2011. They expect the Legislature will receive census data on August 16 and have already scheduled a special session in September to act before an October deadline.

They added that the Legislature is likely to take up the issue of System Development Charges in a coming session. Sen. Beyer pointed out that before the property tax laws were changed as a result of Measure 5 and Measure 49/50, most cities paid for infrastructure to serve growth out of property taxes. The property taxer education imposed in the 1990s, he said, forced cities to look elsewhere for that revenue and they implemented a system of charges on development to pay for the cost of future development. A legislative study to be done in 2022 might lead to discussion of alternatives.

Finally, the legislators discussed how they had designated ARPA federal money. Rep. Lively pointed to investment in a broadband hotel in downtown to improve telecommunications services, a study to try and find a solution to improve the current railroad bridge in Glenwood, and some funding for affordable housing projects and the 42nd Street levee.

Sen. Beyer said he had designated the Lane County Board of Commissioners as a fiscal agent to allocate the funds, with several recommendations like improving emergency radio service and support for Food for Lane County.

Finally, Sen. Beyer announced this would be his last term in the Legislature.