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2011 session brings victories in education and budget, but Oregon job plight was largely ignored

Salem, OR – The 2011 Legislative Session adjourned in the mid-afternoon on Thursday. With an increased number of Republicans in leadership positions, the legislature was able to secure key wins for school choice, education reform, and spending control, but Democrats again stymied any significant action to aid Oregon’s sputtering economy.

“Oregonians can be proud of what Republicans were able to accomplish this session: defeated new tax increases, held the line on spending, and enacted sweeping education reform,” said Senate Republican Leader Ted Ferrioli (R-John Day). “Two years ago, education and budget reforms would not have stood a chance. Oregon families will have access to better educational opportunities and, for the first time in a long time, the legislature budgeted based on existing resources rather than a wish list.”

Similar to a budget proposed by Senate Republicans two years ago, the legislature built a spending plan for the next two years based on the March revenue forecast as a hard ceiling for total spending. The budget set aside a prudent \$400 million in reserves to protect important services and guard against a potentially increased or prolonged recession. The budget preserves funding in K-12 education at the same funding levels of the last two year, with the opportunity to add more in the February session.

“This is the first legislature in more than a decade to say no to budgeting-as-usual and the run-away spending that accompanied it,” said Senator Jackie Winters (R-Salem). “Instead, we started by asking the question how much we could prudently spend, rather than what we wanted to buy. This sounds simple, but it is a big paradigm shift.”

Senate Republicans were also able to help secure three groundbreaking education reforms. House Bill 3681 allows students to enroll in the school district of their choice and opens the door to competition in our education system. House Bill 2301 raises the enrollment cap on virtual charter schools. House Bill 3645 empowers community colleges and public universities to create charter schools.

“Oregon needs to be preparing today’s students to be competitive in the world economy of tomorrow,” said Ferrioli. “These bills give Oregon students choice and opportunity, empowering them to find the educational environment that will best prepare them for success. These are major reforms that will help transform Oregon’s education system.”

Senate Republicans spent much of the session highlighting the need for family wage jobs in Oregon, which continues to boast a functional unemployment rate of 17%ⁱ. A recent *Oregonian* article declared that many Oregon cities will take more than a decade to reach pre-recession employment levelsⁱⁱ.

“Oregonians have one thing on their mind: jobs,” said Senator Alan Olsen (R-Canby). “They are looking to the legislature for big ideas and leadership that will transform this state into a place where families don’t just survive, but thrive. Unfortunately, it is the one area where this legislature failed to provide any long term vision or major policy changes.”

After failing to get traction on a jobs agenda in the Democrat controlled Senate committee process, Republicans forced seven job-creating bills to the floor. The bills were all defeated on party line votes.

The Senate Republican Jobs Agenda included:

Senate Bill 190: designates thirty-two million acre feet of excess Columbia River water for use by farmers and ranchers in Eastern Oregon, water that would otherwise flow uselessly to the ocean. Estimates put potential jobs created from the proposal at more than 16,000.

Senate Bill 472: lowers the tax rates applied to small business like sole proprietorships, partnerships, and family-owned S-corporations to a rate equal with big business.

Senate 476: would allow local governments to fast-track land use changes if new jobs were at stake.

Senate Bill 464: ends artificially low harvest levels in state owned forests and require sustainable management of timber production for maximum public benefit

Senate Joint Resolution 32: gives the legislature veto authority over job-killing agency rules

Senate Bill 897: eliminates the requirement that employers pay the six percent employee contribution to their Public Employees Retirement System account

Senate Joint Resolution 33: would bring Oregon doctors and surgeons under the state’s litigation awards limit

“This is the type of legislation that you would see Republicans passing if they controlled the State Senate,” said Senator Bruce Starr (R-Hillsboro). “We believe this is the type of long-term, big picture thinking that Oregonians want and need to shake this recession.”

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ⁱ Oregon and U.S. Alternative Measures of Labor Underutilization for May 2011, Oregon Employment Department

ⁱⁱ Oregon cities from Portland to Bend will take years to recover lost jobs, June 20, 2011

http://www.oregonlive.com/business/index.ssf/2011/06/oregon_cities_from_portland_to.html