



House of Representatives

July 10, 2005

The Honorable Karen Minnis
Speaker of the House of Representatives
Room 269, State Capitol
Salem, Oregon 97301

Dear Madame Speaker:

Though we appreciate your concern over bringing this session of the Legislature to a timely conclusion, we believe that much work remains yet to be done.

During last year's campaign season, candidates for the House promised action on a broad range of issues that Oregonians care deeply about, including the high cost of healthcare, fighting the war against methamphetamine, creating jobs and strengthening the economy, accountability in government, and funding education. After the Legislature got under way in January, many well-meaning members of both parties rolled up their sleeves and started work on bills that addressed these concerns. In good faith, they introduced legislation that tackled the problems they knew the voters and citizens of Oregon consider important.

Yet, Representative Bob Jensen, while speaking for the Republican majority last Wednesday on the floor of the House, said: "We've moved our agenda forward. . . . we've accomplished what we set out to do." You yourself echoed this belief, saying that there is "little to do."

Though the House Republican leadership may truly believe that the agenda is complete, the House Democrats believe significant work remains undone with respect to the runaway rise in the cost of prescription drugs and health coverage; the staggering impact of the meth epidemic; and a realistic funding solution for schools that enables our children to aspire to excellence. And all over Oregon, people are demanding that the Legislature keep its promise to promote economic growth and stimulate creation of new jobs.

In each of these significant policy areas, major bills await action in the House of Representatives. We have identified 12 important proposals that have passed the Senate with bi-partisan support, but now languish in committees of the House. We call them the "Undone Dozen." We urgently request that you take steps to ensure that the following measures come to the floor for a vote:

1. Senate Bill 1 would require insurance companies to cover mental health problems in the same way they cover other medical conditions. The Senate passed the bill with overwhelming bipartisan support on March 21, by a vote of 23-6. Today, it waits in the House State and Federal Affairs Committee.
2. Senate Bill 329 is one of the most important proposals we've seen to help reduce the cost of health care. It would expand the state's drug purchasing pool to allow private businesses and individuals to save money on prescription drugs. On May 20, it passed the Senate with a bipartisan vote of 19-11. Today, it waits in the House Budget Committee.
3. Senate Bills 756 and 849 enhance women's access to emergency contraceptives, and require insurance companies to cover the cost of prescription contraceptives. These are important bills that affect women's health. The two bills passed the Senate with strong bipartisan support (22-7 and 20-7)—the first in March, the second in May, but today they wait in the House Judiciary Committee.

4. Senate Bill 1040 would make hospital costs more understandable to consumers and insurance companies. The Senate passed the bill with bipartisan support (19-9) on May 17, but the House Budget Committee has not acted on it.
5. Senate Bill 766 would eliminate unreasonably rich severance packages for superintendents of school districts, as well as retirement benefits better than those of other school employees—the so-called “golden parachutes.” The bill would save money for schools, and allow stronger investment in the classroom. The Senate passed it on April 20 with strong bipartisan support (19-8), but today the bill waits in the House Education Committee.
6. Senate Bill 841 and Senate Joint Resolution 2 address the Education Stability Fund, commonly known as the “Rainy Day” fund. The first would require transfer of the entire General Fund ending balance (up to a limit of two percent of all General Fund expenditures) to the Education Stability Fund. The second would refer a constitutional amendment to the voters, enabling them to increase the Education Stability Fund from five percent to 10 percent of General Fund revenues. These are serious, effective proposals that could provide a real cushion for school funding. They both passed the Senate with overwhelming bipartisan support on June 1, but today they wait in the House Budget Committee and the House State and Federal Affairs Committee.
7. Senate Bill 467 would enable the Department of Education to reimburse school districts and others who provide summer food services to the children of low-income families. The price tag would be \$150,000 per biennium. The Senate passed the bill with strong bipartisan support (25-3) on June 6, but today the bill waits in the House Budget Committee.
8. Senate Bill 71, or “Connect Oregon,” is a bill that would allocate \$100 million in Lottery-backed bonds for improvements to air transport systems, railways, and seaports throughout the state—an excellent opportunity to stimulate business development and create thousands of new jobs. Madame Speaker, we must not waste this golden opportunity to strengthen Oregon’s economy. The bill passed the Senate unanimously on June 22, but today it’s dying in the House State and Federal Affairs Committee.
9. Senate Bill 152, which—among other things—authorizes Lottery funds to support construction bonds to build a new passenger terminal at the North Bend Airport. This bill is vital to the economy of the South Coast. The Senate passed the bill unanimously on June 24, but today it waits in the House Budget Committee.
10. Senate Bill 408 would require investor-owned utilities to credit their customers’ accounts for the estimated taxes they add to their customers’ bills, instead of keeping the money after reducing their tax liability with credits and loopholes. The Senate passed the bill with overwhelming bipartisan support (26-4) on June 8, but today it waits in the House State and Federal Affairs Committee.
11. Senate Bill 480 strengthens penalties for certain abusive tax shelters, and provides periods of amnesty to encourage immediate compliance. Republicans and Democrats alike loved this bill in the Senate, where it passed with overwhelming bipartisan support (23-3) on March 23. Today it waits in the House Budget Committee.
12. Senate Joint Resolution 14 responds to a very real problem in Oregon. Because of the infamous “double-majority” requirement, voters in local property tax elections can cast a “no” vote by simply not voting at all. This measure would enable the voters to amend the constitution by eliminating the requirement for a turnout by a majority of voters in property tax elections. But it would restrict such elections to the November general election in even-numbered years and the May election in any year. The Senate passed this bill with strong bipartisan support (20-8) on April 12, but today it languishes in the House Revenue Committee.

I emphasize, Madame Speaker, that the proposals listed above—the “Undone Dozen”—are not partisan attempts to embarrass one party or the other in the House. They all have bipartisan support. They are good public policy, because

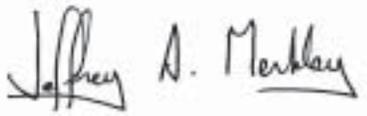
they respond to real problems. It would be just plain wrong to let these good pieces of legislation wither and die in committee.

Unfortunately, these are not the only measures that cry out for action. We must not end this session of the Legislature without passing the "Meth Package," which Oregon's communities so desperately need. The time has come to do more than talk about this urgent problem. The time has come to act.

In closing, Madame Speaker, I respectfully remind you that it's not too late for the Legislature to keep its promises. You have the authority to facilitate legislative action on these critical bills and proposals. I guarantee that if you choose to do so, you will have the enthusiastic and grateful support of the House Democrats.

With best wishes, I am

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeffrey A. Merkley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a clear, legible font.

Jeff Merkley
House Democratic Leader