

State legislators must find common ground

In today's political climate, it seems easy to feel disconnected from the laws and legislation affecting the lives of those around us, but at Westside Economic Alliance (WEA), we strive to build bridges and fill information gaps. This is why the organization hosts a Legislative Reception each year. It's a chance for its members and state legislators to get to know one another and to share the issues being felt throughout the region.

Last month about 50 WEA members and 11 state legislators gathered for a reception at Legacy Health's Meridian Park Medical Center. The atmosphere was kept light, yet serious. It was a welcoming environment. WEA doesn't hold to the philosophy of butting heads to get things done. Instead, we want key leaders at the table, and we want to talk it out, find common ground, collaborate, partner, and in the end, have better policy. This is why we have both private and public sector members. It's about bringing people together for the greater good and serving the mission of advocating for a healthy economic climate.

During the Legislative Reception, the legislators attending had the opportunity to share what issues they are working on right now. This year's legislature is a short session of just 35 days. The short session was designed for technical and budgetary fixes. Republican Senator Kim Thatcher wants to see the short session eliminated because it is being used for more than small policy changes.

Senator Michael Dembrow talked about the new greenhouse gas emissions legislation and announced WEA's Legislative Reception to be the first place where the actual bill number was being announced - SB1530. He said this new legislation on emissions would have three parts, allowing for a phased-in approach geographically. According to Dembrow, the Portland metropolitan area would see its implementation almost immediately. Other urban areas in the state, importing 10 million gallons of gas or more, would follow in 2025. The second component of the legislation would look at manufacturing, especially those manufacturers considered to use a lot of natural gas and are sensitive to trade competition. The third component would focus on how money is invested in the program - this would include wildfire prevention and energy efficiency. Representative Ken Helm talked about the carbon reduction emissions bill (HB2020) the House passed in 2019, and he expressed his disappointment in it not passing the Senate. It sounded like his enthusiasm had dampened some, but he was going to give the new proposed legislation a close look. He was concerned about the delay or phase-in approach of the legislation and the possibility it could keep Oregon from participating in the Western Climate Initiative. Other legislators highlighted the cost of climate change or the affect of it. Representative Janeen Sollman pointed to an increase in washed out roads, wildfires, and acidic ocean levels, while Representative Rachel Prusak, who is an in-home nurse, said she sees climate refugees - people who have moved here due to floods and fires in other regions.

Other issues touched on during the Legislative Reception included transportation and the Rose Quarter portion of I-5. Senator Lew Fredericks encouraged Washington County leaders, like Commissioner Roy Rogers, to attend community meetings in his district. Those most vocal in Portland do not want to see I-5 expanded beyond its current four lanes (two in each direction) and fail to see it as a major freight corridor for the Pacific Northwest. It is an area that affects not just Portland but other areas of the state and outside Oregon too.

Safe gun storage, healthcare, higher education, and workforce development were also big topics with the state legislators.

WEA will be monitoring the activities in Salem in the coming days. What seems most important is for our legislators to come to the table prepared to find common ground because divisiveness leaves us empty with a lot of possible misunderstanding. As one former Westside elected leader suggested, agree to debate, but afterwards let's sit down for lunch together.