

# The Oregonian

## **Legislative Democrats not exactly team unity**

**Salem reality - New members come from across the state and hold views across the spectrum**

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It's been 16 years since Democrats simultaneously controlled the Oregon House, Senate and governor's office. But for those who think Portland liberals will rule the day, here's a reality check: Oregon Democrats don't all think -- or vote -- alike.

That means there will be plenty of debate when the 2007 Legislature begins Monday about civil unions for gays and lesbians, tax and spending proposals, environmental protections and other issues. Ranging in age from 30 to 76, Democratic legislators represent both urban centers and small coastal towns. Some are Oregon natives, others East Coast transplants. Many were raised in Republican families, and a few were even once Republicans themselves. They represent a variety of faiths and life experiences -- from the high-tech entrepreneur to the single mother who worked her way through graduate school.

Sure, there's Rep. Jackie Dingfelder, a Democrat from Northeast Portland, who bleeds green for the environment. She has a 100 percent positive rating from the Oregon League of Conservation Voters and, next session, a key chairmanship of the House Energy and Environment Committee.

Dingfelder wants Oregon to lead on renewable energy standards and biofuels production, and she wants to make sure the Department of Environmental Quality has enough money to regulate air and water pollution. With Democrats in charge, Dingfelder now has the power to help make that happen.

But there's also Sen. Betsy Johnson, a Democrat from Scappoose who says she often finds herself on the other side of her Democratic colleagues on environmental issues.

Last session, when conservation groups pushed for tighter regulations on so-called toxic mixing zones -- where industrial outflows are allowed to mix with river water before pollution is measured -- Johnson argued more regulation could cost too many jobs.

She warned her caucus: "You guys might as well take up the welcome mat in Columbia County."

And there's Sen. Kurt Schrader, the Canby Democrat who says growing canola in the Willamette Valley for the production of biofuel is a foolish idea because canola crops can bring pests and diseases that threaten more lucrative crops.

"It makes no sense," Schrader says. "I support biofuels, but I don't look at it as a religious jihad."

There also is unity among Democrats, of course, particularly when it comes to supporting schools and making health care more affordable and accessible.

Before the 2006 election, House and Senate Democrats independently issued priority lists for the upcoming session. They want smaller class sizes, especially in the early grades, and to ensure that there's enough money to keep schools in session the full academic year. Translation: no more embarrassing Doonesbury comic strips.

Democrats also want to see that every child in Oregon has health care insurance.

And they appear to agree with the governor's proposal to divert corporate kicker tax rebates into a state rainy day savings account, at least for the next two years.

Still, Senate Majority Leader Kate Brown, D-Portland, says there are plenty of opinions on how to achieve their goals.

"There are strong differences on just about every issue," Brown says.

For example, on taxes and spending, Brown says, some Democrats are saying: "Let's rethink how Oregon collects and spends revenue, while others say don't raise my taxes."

Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, notes that Oregon Democrats have always been a diverse group when it comes to race, gender and age. But now he says, there's also far more geographic diversity, as Eastern Oregon was about the only place Democrats didn't make inroads last election.

"Neither chamber would be Democratic today without an ability to win seats in rural Oregon," he says, "I think we understand that."

Republican Senate Leader Ted Ferrioli of John Day predicts Democrats who wanted to control both chambers of the Legislature also will find it a challenge now that they got what they wanted.

"The problem is to keep those people stifled and in line and quiet," he says. "They won't go for it for long."

The diversity among Democratic voices might be most profound in the House, where Democrats picked up four seats, giving them a 31-29 majority.

House Democrats then chose moderate Dave Hunt of Clackamas County as their majority leader over Diane Rosenbaum, a former union official from Southeast Portland.

Newcomers to the House include David Edwards, who bought airtime on Christian radio during the campaign and spent the summer visiting churches in his Washington County district. He isn't afraid to talk about faith and how it informs his views.

For example, Edwards says, he's not opposed to a law allowing gays and lesbians to form civil unions. But he adds: "My concern as a person of faith about civil unions is that I don't want to put churches in a position that may make them subject to lawsuits, to force them to preside over marriages that violate their community of faith."

Edwards counts himself among the "fiscal conservatives" in the Democratic caucus -- a critical swing group that could team with Republicans to block tax increases or pass tax cuts.

Another member of the group could be Rep. Betty Komp, Democrat from Woodburn, who says she won't be spending the state's money "in haste or waste."

The third of 14 children, Komp grew up poor on a dairy farm in Silverton. Her family home might not always have had a lot of heat, she says, but there was always a good dinner.

Komp became pregnant while still in high school and married at 18. She divorced and started college when she was nearly 40. She says she knows what it's like to be a working family, struggling to make ends meet.

This session, Komp says, "My party will not see me supporting many of the proposed new taxes."

Last session, when most Democrats sat on one side of the House chamber and Republicans on the other, Komp ended up with a desk among the Republicans.

She said she appreciated getting to know people from the opposing party at a time when most Republicans

and Democrats were bitterly divided.

This fall, when it was again time to pick desks, Komp asked to remain with the Republicans.

"I believe in more than just working across the aisle," she jokes. "I sit with them."

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