



Unprecedented Legislative Session Underway

By Jim McCauley, Legislative Director

Following a two-day delay, the 2021 session started on January 21. We are in a much different place now than in 2019 or 2020, and I don't see the virtual legislative process changing until late spring at the earliest. Whenever that change comes, it will be completely dependent on metrics associated with the world-wide Coronavirus pandemic. These are truly unprecedented times, and hopefully Oregon will not have to experience a legislative session in this format in the future.

Given our legislative experience since last March, we have all been challenged to find methods of communicating with members of the Legislature, the governor's office, and legislative leadership. With the amount of LOC weekly briefings, which I think we are now north of 40, our communication has been limited to a virtual world. There is no ability to have a cup of coffee, meet a legislator in their office, or simply have a conversation in the hallways of the Capitol or between committee hearings. My personal legislative experience has been to pull legislators off the House floor during votes, or catching a legislator between committee meetings. Preset meetings in offices were typically rare, because of the volume of bills and speed that legislation can move.

Since last March, the Legislature has convened three times for special sessions to advance priority legislation determined by Governor Brown and the Democratic leadership in the House and Senate. In addition, the state's Emergency Board has met 13 times to allocate funding for a variety of programs to address the ongoing public health emergency and economic crisis brought on by the pandemic. The LOC's ability—or literally any organization's ability—to impact these conversations has been limited at best. Despite the constraints, we did have success advancing a broadband bill, which will generate \$10 million annually to leverage expansion and connectivity to communities and regions currently without high speed internet. We also had success supporting elements of a police reform package that the LOC has been trying to advance for years.

Once the November elections were complete, the LOC's government relations team focused on the immediate need to communicate our collective set of priorities to the new legislators within the virtual environment. The primary take-home message for all of us was that we must remain diligent with our communications, and we are going to need help from LOC members to advance legislation that makes sense to cities and stop the annual onslaught of damaging legislative concepts. The other take-home message was that we have some new legislators with local government experience, which I will say is a great addition to a Legislature that largely does not have a lot of former mayors, council members or individuals with any local government experience.

Grass Roots Lobbying Critical

I want to stress a simple message: the grass roots component of our legislative work will largely define how the session goes for LOC. The LOC's membership has done a great job in the past answering the call on any number of our requests for testimony or outreach to legislators. During the interim, this effort was critical in getting more than half the Legislature to endorse the idea that local governments needed a greater share of the federal Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF) from the state. While this effort fell short of what we had hoped for, it did cause state leadership to pause, because we had a lock on votes. The point of this recent example of member lobbying is that every mayor and council member play a critical role in communicating with the Legislature. All you have to do is provide the education necessary for the Senate or House member to at the very least make a decision with "eyes and ears wide open." Your legislator may not ultimately make a decision you agree with or that is the best outcome for your city on a particular bill—but don't give up! Lobbying is not a perfect process, and if we can get some legislators to be 50% supportive of our priorities, it would be a significant step forward!

So, stay diligent, stay in touch, and keep in contact with your legislator. ■