

Regional legislators reflect on their past ye

By Joe Wrabeck
jwrabeck@countrymedia.net



Betsy Johnson



David Gomborg



Arnie Roblan

The 73rd Oregon Legislative Assembly adjourned July 8. We asked the four state legislators who represent Tillamook County what important work they thought the Legislature had done — and not done.

Responding to our questions were state Sen. Betsy Johnson, whose District 16 includes the north half of Tillamook County; Rep. David Gomborg (House District 10) and Sen. Arnie Roblan (Senate District 5), who represent south Tillamook County; and Rep. Debbie Boone, who represents north Tillamook County and responded by email.

Gomborg, Johnson and Roblan all said that increasing state funding for education, by more than \$1 billion, was one of this Legislature's most important accomplishments. (The Legislature also increased capital construction funding for community colleges.)

The extra money for schools basically restores the cuts made in state education funding in recent years, Gomborg told the Headlight Herald. And it was done without raising taxes.

Part of that money comes from increased tax collections projected from an improving economy. About \$700 million is from "adjustments" to benefits being paid from the Public Employees Retirement System (PERS).

The state's "grand bargain," as Johnson called it — tying PERS reform to education funding — "fell short of expectations," she said. "The failure of the Legislature to deal with PERS will be a continuing issue."

Johnson predicted the Legislature's 2014 session would be devoted largely to PERS.

Roblan agreed. "A lot of people tried to do more," he said. "We had every opportunity to get it done, but nobody could pull the trigger."

For his part, Gomborg defended the Legislature's limited PERS adjustments. What the Legislature did will be challenged in court, he said, "and you don't want to make it more than you can pay back if the courts throw it out."

Although there have been some high-profile abuses of the retirement system, said Gomborg, most PERS retirees on Oregon's coast aren't getting much money under the system.

In other business, the state will be hiring the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to dredge coastal harbors, something the corps is supposed to do (they built the facilities) but says it doesn't have the money to do.

"I'm especially proud of the dredging," Johnson said. It's more than money, she added; "there are enormously complex permitting issues."

"We've been working closely with the Corps of Engineers, working out a template to make permitting easier so it doesn't take years and years."

The dredging will start on the south Oregon coast and work north. "Kevin [Garibaldi port manager Kevin Greenwood] has expressed his frustration [with the dredging starting south of this region]," Johnson said. "He has very ambitious plans. The 'coastal caucus' wants to do everything we can to help."

Betsy (Johnson), Debbie (Boone) and I are not going to rest until the dredging equipment is parked in Tillamook Bay," Gomborg said.

Johnson also outlined "a variety of little bills." For one, the "Connect Oregon" grant program was re-capitalized, this time including a bicycle-pedestrian component that Johnson said would enable funds to be used on the "Rails and Trails" project to and through the Salmonberry Canyon area.

Boone focused on emergency preparedness: developing an Oregon Resilience Plan to restore communications, transportation and power following a disaster; continuing seismic retrofits of schools and emergency buildings; and allowing emergency facilities to power their generators with fuel that does not include "green" additives (because the additives break down over time).

Gomborg, who owns a business in Lincoln City ("I reminded my colleagues more than once that I'm one of the few people in the building that actually owns a cash register," he said) cited a number of small-business bills: creating a Small Business Assistance Office; fully funding Small Business Development Centers; and organizing a "one stop

center" for permits, licenses and fees to help make starting a business easier.

Roblan, a former high school principal, pointed to legislation making it easier for students to get ahead start on college by accumulating college credits in high school.

And a new high school program will six state-run medical schools at graduate goes

back to a rural area to work, plus "there's a loan forgiveness program for doctors already out there practicing."

Johnson, who was in a car accident partly as a result of the legislative session and subsequently confined to a wheelchair, experienced the State Capitol as a handicapped person. "It was terrible," she said.

