

With Ore. legislative session over, focus turns to elections

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By JULIA SILVERMAN / Associated Press

Those wanting a sneak peek at the GOP's playbook for winning back the Oregon House in 2008 should look no further than the just-concluded legislative session.

Though they were in the minority in both the House and the Senate for the first time in 16 years, Republicans held the line on taxes, turning back efforts to raise the cigarette tax, the beer tax and the minimum tax paid by corporations, not to mention large-scale tax reform.

Their plan is to fly that "no new taxes" flag high over the next 18 months, and remind voters constantly that their Democratic colleagues were behind each of those failed efforts.

Democrats, meanwhile, will counter that their scuttled proposals would have sensibly funded needed services with universal, apple-pie appeal such as health insurance for poor children and more state police.

An all-out battle for control of the Oregon House is already under way, with the House Republican caucus having spent about \$70,000 on attack mailers, automated phone calls and radio ads.

Every House swing district, and some marginal ones, should be hotly contested, from West Linn and Hillsboro in the Portland suburbs to The Dalles in Wasco County.

The House Republicans' task could be complicated by the high number of their members said to be pondering retirement, including House Minority Leader Wayne Scott of Canby and Rep. Donna Nelson of McMinnville, both districts that could be up for grabs without a comfortably ensconced incumbent.

Former House Speaker Karen Minnis, R-Wood Village, once the most powerful woman in Oregon politics and a Democratic bete noire, announced that she's retiring.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Scott said only two members of his caucus have told him that they would not be back, and that he had "not made any decision to retire."

Keep an eye out, though, for decisions from some key Republican moderates including Rep. Patti Smith of Corbett, who has often seemed frustrated with her fellow GOP members this session, even declining to attend regular caucus sessions.

Smith's district stretches to recently "blue" Hood River, and Democrats would love a shot at an open seat there.

Republican Rep. Sal Esquivel of Medford, another occasional GOP dissident who pushed hard for a beer tax but couldn't find support in his caucus, has also been noncommittal. He won in 2006 by only 900 votes.

Democrats also have their sights on the seats held by Rep. John Dallum of The Dalles, whose district has been picking up yuppie spillover from neighboring Hood River County, and who won by fewer than 300 votes. Rep. John Lim of Gresham could also be a Democratic target; Lim has been preparing for that possibility, even voting with Democrats on plans to raise the cigarette tax to fund an expansion of children's health care.

Though Oregon generally has been trending Democratic, with about 50 percent of respondents in a recent poll saying they have a "very unfavorable" view of President Bush, state Democrats will also find themselves playing their share of defense.

Republicans are eyeing seats held by Rep. David Edwards of Hillsboro and Rep. Chris Edwards of Eugene, both freshmen whose constituents already are getting Republican attack mail. The GOP is also watching to see if Rep. Greg Macpherson leaves his Lake Oswego-area seat to run for attorney general, since the district has its share of old-school Republicans, of the moderate Tom McCall variety.

And they're talking up a possible challenger to Rep. Mike Schaufler, a conservative Democrat from the outer fringes of Portland.

In the state Senate, Republicans concede they have little chance of winning back control of the chamber, choosing instead to try and chip away at the Democrats' wide margin in hopes of taking control by 2012.

But there still will be races to watch. State Sen. Ben Westlund, D-Bend, says he's seriously considering a run at the state treasurer's job; even if he decides against it, it's unlikely that he'd be able to retain his seat in conservative Deschutes County, after switching his party affiliation twice — from Republican to Independent and then to Democrat — in the last year or so.

Democrats are expecting Rep. Jackie Dingfelder, who shepherded renewable energy legislation through the House this session, to make a run at the Portland-area Senate seat being vacated by the chamber's only independent, Sen. Avel Gordly. And they'll likely be protecting swing district seats held by Sen. Joanne Verger of Coos Bay and Sen. Laurie Monnes Anderson of Gresham.

More Senate seats could open up, as the jockeying for statewide offices — and positioning for the 2010 governor's race — settles down. State Sen. Vicki Walker, a Eugene Democrat, has already announced that she's running for the secretary of state's

job, while Sen. Bruce Starr, R-Hillsboro, says he hasn't decided whether to run for the seat.

A few legislators could challenge U.S. Sen. Gordon Smith, too; House Speaker Jeff Merkley has been approached about the race, and State Sen. Alan Bates, D-Ashland, has also said he's interested.