

## **Too Close For Comfort.**

### **A Summary of the 2014 Election Cycle**

*By Bill Cross & Niki Terzieff, BOMA's Government Affairs Advocates*



That is how Democrats in Salem felt their numbers were when entering into the 2014 election cycle. It is also how many felt when the polls closed at 8 p.m. on Tuesday, November 4th. While some races were merely flights of fancy in districts that would never likely change hands, others ended in mid-air dog fights, with some elections not being conceded or called for nearly a week.

In the State Senate, a pilot from Scappoose, Sen. Betsy Johnson, was often the deciding factor in whether or not a bill would pass out of the chamber. She has played the one-vote swing in the 16-14 Democratic majority for many years now, and has voted conservatively on some social issues and on most economic issues. She will retain that seat for as long as she likes, so the balance remains delicate.

In Southern Oregon, another conservative Democrat who chose to take the less conservative path on some tough issues had to have his massive re-election operation underway for nearly two years. Sen. Alan Bates had to contend with the partisanship of the State of Jefferson, but prevailed for another term and will continue to add his voice to the health care and human services debate. Losing "Doc" Bates would have been a set-back to the Democrats, it even would have negated any pick-up seats. To ensure power, D's needed to mount some campaigns on the offense as well. That's why this election cycle, however, there were three challengers to watch who would be able to send the Senate Republicans into a tail spin.

In Linn-Benton Counties, including Corvallis and Albany, incumbent Sen. Betsy Close (R), a former County Commissioner and House Member, was defeated by Corvallis Representative, Sara Gelser (D). Gelser's nearly 9% margin shifted the balance of power in Salem for the 2015 Session. Voters in SD 8 were saturated with mail, tv ads, radio spots, phone calls and door knocks. In the end, Rep. Gelser was able to out-pace Close in field operations, excelled in fundraising and was able to tout a record that appears to be significantly more in line with those who turned in their ballots. Issues that likely played well with the voting population, located by the university, were women's health and education.

The big upset in the State Senate was the somewhat surprising victory of former State Representative from Hillsboro, Chuck Riley (D), and the long-time incumbent in Washington County, Sen. Bruce Starr (R). Thought by many pundits to be a long shot, Riley slowly and steadily closed the gap in SD 15. Over the week following election day he was thousands behind, then hundreds, and as the reporting ceased going into the weekend, Riley was 13 votes shy. Ultimately, his name recognition and the massive communication plan - including negative pieces about Starr's conservative record - helped Senator-elect Chuck Riley write the Cinderella

story of the cycle.

In Clackamas, however, SD 20 was a different tale. Voters from Oregon City, Canby and into the north valley returned their incumbent, Sen. Alan Olsen (R) to serve in Salem. Olsen was challenged by a Democrat who had previously run for County Commission in Clackamas and lost - as nearly all Democrats there do. In a highly conservative district, perceived as too liberal and with hamstrung resources against the incumbent, Jamie Damon came within 4% of Olsen. For those same reasons some are calling this challenge a success, but as we go into the next chapter, our protagonist will still be Sen. Alan Olsen.

Over in the House, with 34 D's and 26 R's, the plot lines and themes have been a bit more predictable over the past couple of years. Across the country, this off-Presidential election cycle is widely seen as a backlash to the Democratic leadership at both the Federal level and in State Capitols. Oregon, as it so often does, bucked that trend and held off the "red tide." All hopes of returning to an historic even-split in the House were decidedly dashed, as Republicans lost a seat in the heart of the Willamette Valley.

Moderate Republican, Vicki Berger, announced that she was going to step down from her long-time tenure as the State Representative from Polk County not long after the 2014 Session adjourned. For a relatively rural district, Rep. Berger was socially moderate, but a well-known, beloved figure for nearly a decade. Moving into her office is a Veteran and community college professor, Paul Evans (D). HD 20 was a battleground of its own with negative ads, allegations of untoward behaviors and another spotlight in the difference of value systems. Kathy Goss, the Republican running for this open seat, didn't have a campaign plan that out-paced Evans and the registration edge was unhelpful.

Many House Candidates did not have to worry about big battles, with constituents hiring these folks for the job not more than two years ago. Some districts, however, proved that for Democrats to remain in the majority they were going to have to hit the gas. In Hillsboro it was a defensive play for the Democrats; they had to hold the seat left open by Ben Unger, former staff to the Attorney General turned Legislator, for certain. The Democrat, Susan McLain, took a narrow, but clear win with 7% points above the Republican. McLain is a former Metro Councilor and public school teacher and should bring some solid experience in both education and land use policy. The twin district, held by incumbent Joe Gallagos, won't be undergoing any regime change, either - though Rep. Gallagos' seat originally was feared to be potential trouble.

The opposite side of the Metro area took its share of the spotlight, as well. In East County and Gresham, Democrats Shemia Fagan and Carla Piluso both had polls and vote counts that were surprisingly tight. Rep. Fagan was not declared the winner in her district until 3:30 Wednesday morning. While Piluso was deemed successful earlier in the evening, she had the strange distinction of running against an effective write-in Republican candidate. The former Rep., Greg Matthews, endorsed Piluso - the first female Police Chief in Gresham - and that seat

remains in blue hands. Slightly south in Clackamas County Brent Barton, current Representative for HD 40, felt like it was Groundhog’s Day when squaring off for another tough campaign against Steve Newgard, his opponent in 2012. Barton will return to office, winning with 55%.

Regardless of which side of the aisle you sit on, it’s clear that in Oregon, unlike the rest of the country, Democrats in the Legislature will have plenty of leg room to kick back and enjoy flight #2015. In the cockpit, however, incumbent John Lifesaver Doctor Governor Kitzhaber had an uncomfortable win against State Representative from southern Oregon, Dennis Richardson. Despite an unprecedented third term steering the state, or perhaps because of it, Governor Kitzhaber had an eroded progressive base and an angered opposition party, not leaving him a lot of space to occupy. An under-vote in this race was expected and with every vote crucial, the two campaigns embarked on aggressive and successful fundraising campaigns.

Overall, Kitzhaber raised nearly \$5 million this cycle, a feat called “quite impressive” by the Willamette Week newspaper. That was about the nicest thing that the media had to say about John Kitzhaber, especially after news broke of his fiancée’s bad decisions and possible ethics violations. On the heels of Cover Oregon falling apart, with a year predicted to be a big one for Republicans and the nod from his party, Rep. Dennis Richardson mounted a tough, grassroots style campaign. He came within 5% of the longest-serving Governor in state history, which is close ... but no cigar.

**BALLOT MEASURES**

As they do each election cycle, Ballot Measures proliferated. Oregonians returned mixed results, as they seem to do, as well, on the following:

#	What it Does	Result
86	Amends Oregon Constitution to create fund for Oregonians pursuing post-secondary education; authorizes debt to finance	Failed
87	Allows judges to be hired by the National Guard and public universities; allows school employees to serve in the legislature	Passed
88	Upholds four-year driver licenses for those who cannot prove legal presence in the United States	Failed
89	Guarantees equal rights regardless of sex	Passed
90	Creates an open, top-two primary election system	Failed
91	Legalizes recreational marijuana; tasks Oregon Liquor Control Commission with regulation of its sale	Passed
92	Mandates labeling of certain foodstuffs that contain genetically modified organisms	Failed

Money poured into the ballot measure campaigns this year, as corporate funders opened their wallets on the Top Two Primary measure and the “GMO” measure. The No on 92 campaign received a check for \$4 million one afternoon, affording them enhanced media and communications. No Facebook page was safe as No on 92 ads popped up regularly; TV was a long advertisement with breaks, it seemed, for the actual shows. Ultimately, after the yes campaign would not concede, the media called this race over - with NO on 92 squeaking out a 50.5% victory. The blitzkrieg was successful. With less ability to communicate to the public and a less popular issue to sell to voters, proponents of M88 failed to reach them and lost with only 33%. Recreational marijuana and the ERA both prevailed, not surprising in this progressive state, and perhaps we will see M86 reappear in 2016, but for now we should turn our attention back to the Capitol building.

Please feel free to contact us at any time if you have any questions by emailing Bill Cross at [bill@wvcross.com](mailto:bill@wvcross.com) or Niki Terzieff at [niki@leadingedgepublicaffairs.com](mailto:niki@leadingedgepublicaffairs.com).