



POLITICS

Oregon's Legislative Emergency Board balks at PPE purchases

By [Jeff Mapes](#) (OPB)

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Lawmakers are showing the strain of COVID-19 response.

Oregon's Legislative Emergency Board faced a revolt Wednesday over how to spend the last of its federal aid for dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Legislative leaders couldn't get a majority of the board to agree to spend \$105 million on purchases of personal protective equipment that the state has been distributing to health care providers, emergency responders and other workers who need protection from the coronavirus.

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Several lawmakers from both parties on the emergency board – which rules on budget issues when the Legislature isn't in session – complained that their counties and cities have been left in the lurch when it comes to getting a fair share of the \$1.4 billion the state has received in federal aid.

“The counties want to know,” said Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, “Can we have money to spend on our priorities, not the appropriations that the state deems we need?”

Gov. Kate Brown has called legislators [back to Salem](#) for a special session Monday, and it appears that legislative leaders will take up the issue of the money for the protective equipment then. House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, warned that the state has been moving ahead for months on buying the gear to distribute at the local level and “somebody is going to pay for that from somewhere.”



In a nearly three-hour session, lawmakers did agree to spend another \$105 million on testing and contact tracing as well as \$45 million to address the disproportionate impact the pandemic has had on people of color and tribal communities. That latter package includes money for such things as direct food and housing aid, childcare support and technology for distance learning and telehealth services.

Altogether, they approved more than \$260 million in spending, using up almost all of the federal emergency response aid. Congressional leaders are negotiating another coronavirus relief package that could provide more money.

Counties and cities earlier this year had lobbied for more than \$600 million in direct aid, arguing that fit how federal officials said the money should be distributed. But the Emergency Board instead voted to more tightly control the money, arguing that the state could use its purchasing power to get better deals on personal protective equipment while guiding the overall response to the pandemic.

Sen. Arnie Roblan, D-Coos Bay, said he initially wanted more of the money to go to local governments. But he said Lincoln County, which is in his district, was overwhelmed by a surge of infections stemming from an outbreak at a seafood processing facility. The state helped ramp up a contact tracing system “spent a lot of money” and helped tamp down the outbreak, he said.

“We have to have resources at the state level” when a local area gets into trouble, Roblan said.

Rep. Susan McLain, D-Hillsboro, said she appreciated the shortfalls many counties and cities are facing but said that won’t be solved unless there is more federal aid coming. “There’s not enough money to do all the things we want to do.”

Throughout the hearing, it was clear that legislators were feeling the pressure of the pandemic. Johnson, the Scappoose senator, complained that too much state aid is slated to go community-based groups that will help on contact tracing and other issues but haven’t been necessarily carefully vetted.

“This is unnerving,” she said, “to be delegating this kind of money to unknown beneficiaries with who knows what kind of track records.”

For his part, Sen. Fred Girod, R-Stayton, complained about an earlier Emergency Board decision to provide millions to [performance facilities](#) around the state.



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Kanani Cortez reports for NPR's Next Generation Radio. Pacific Islanders are being hit hard by COVID-19, and have higher rates of illness than any other racial group. Joe Enlet is from Chuuk,

Micronesia, and is a pastor and advocate for the Micronesian community in Oregon. Enlet says despite the grief and mourning, he remains hopeful because his community is finally being heard.

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