

From the Desk of  
Senator Ted Ferrell

## Leave the minimum wage alone

Oregon shouldn't be having an acrimonious debate over increasing the minimum wage.

More than a decade ago, the state's voters approved a minimum wage that remains among the nation's highest, automatically keeps pace with inflation and the median income, and causes no discernible disruptions to labor markets.

Other states and the federal government would do well to copy Oregon's successful idea, and Oregonians should stick with it.

In 2002, Oregon voters approved Measure 25, which pegged the state's minimum wage at \$6.90 per hour in 2003 and required annual cost-of-living adjustments thereafter. The minimum has climbed since then by small steps to \$9.25 — the second-highest of any state until the first of this year, when it slipped to eighth place. California and Massachusetts now lead the nation at \$10 per hour.

The Legislature is debating a proposals that could vault Oregon into the lead. On Thursday, the Senate approved a three-tier plan, Senate Bill 1532, with a minimum wage by 2022 of \$14.75 per hour in the Portland area, \$13.75 in other urban areas such as Eugene and Bend, and \$12.50 an hour in rural parts of the state.

Complex economic and social issues were not intended to be taken up during the Legislature's brief sessions in even-numbered years. But Gov. Kate Brown and the Legislature believe they must head off groups that are planning to pass petitions for a ballot measures that would raise the minimum wage to \$15 per hour statewide by 2019. A poll conducted late last year showed voters narrowly in support of a \$15-an-hour minimum.

But such fears might not be justified. A strong case can be made in favor of Oregon's current approach to the minimum wage, and it's likely that the debate over a \$15 minimum would expose risks that voters ultimately would choose to avoid. Lawmakers should not be stampeded into a hurried embrace of a bad proposal to avoid the possibility of an even-worse one.

Lawmakers should be defending this equilibrium, not preparing to sacrifice it.