

## Oregon House leaders pledge more accessibility

Democrats still will close caucus meetings to media

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Oregon House Democratic leaders offered an olive branch to Republicans Tuesday, promising a new era of inclusiveness when they take control of the chamber in January.

"This session will be the most open, accessible session in at least a generation in Oregon," said Rep. Dave Hunt, D-Milwaukie, the next House majority leader.

Hunt appeared with the incoming House speaker, Jeff Merkley, D-Portland, and Rep. Diane Rosenbaum, D-Portland, in the trio's first press briefing since the Nov. 7 election, when they secured Democrats' first House majority in 16 years.

House Republican leaders kept a partisan lock on the chamber in the 2005 session. GOP leaders squelched several bills introduced by Democrats and punished Democrats for using parliamentary gimmicks to drum up publicity for languishing bills.

There won't be any payback when Democrats regain power with their new 31-29 majority, the new House leaders said.

"There are not going to be things that are meant to make Democrats look good and Republicans look bad," Hunt said. "I think the best way we can respond is to demonstrate how good government can function."

Merkley and Rosenbaum stressed the need for increased funding of the Oregon Government Standards and Practices Commission, and for independent funding so the ethics watchdog isn't punished for investigating lawmakers.

"I have proposed the concept of a zero-gift limit," Merkley said. Free T-shirts and mugs are OK, he said, but not free meals, sports tickets, and out-of-state junkets that give lobbyists "schmoozing" opportunities with lawmakers.

"If I want to go to the Trail Blazers," Merkley said, "I should be paying for my own ticket."

But Democrats' efforts at openness won't extend to their own caucus meetings, which will remain closed to the media. House Democrats witnessed problems when Senate Democrats opened their meetings to the press, Merkley said, and don't want to discuss political strategies in front of reporters.

"The caucuses are very much like the half-time of a football game," he said.

House Democratic leaders said they expect to support, in due course, bills that provide civil unions for same-sex couples and that protect people from discrimination based on sexual orientation.

House Democrats didn't put tax increases in their common agenda during the campaign season, Merkley said. Any money-raising plans, which require a three-fifths supermajority, will require consultations with Republicans and bipartisan support, he said.

Three tax proposals by Gov. Ted Kulongoski will be the "starting point" for the

### What's next

Rep. Jeff Merkley, in consultation with House members, will create committees for the 2007 Legislature and appoint committee chairs and members.

The most influential House meeting after Merkley and Jeff Hunt, likely to be the co-chairman of the budget writing Joint Ways and Means Committee.

discussion on new revenue, Merkley said. Those are a cigarette tax increase to provide health insurance for all children and more adults, an increase in the \$10 corporate minimum tax to fund an expansion of Head Start preschool, and suspending corporate "kicker" tax rebates, with the money going into reserves.

House Democrats support expanding the number of state troopers on the highways, Merkley said. But there is no consensus on Kulongoski's proposal to levy a surcharge on car insurance to pay for it, he said.

House Democrats won't tamper with anticipated individual tax rebates, expected to top \$1 billion, Hunt said.

And they don't expect to make a run at providing universal health care, a priority for many state senators.

If Democrats can extend health care to all children, and lower the cost of prescription drugs, those would be huge steps forward, Hunt said.

After being out of power for 16 years, Democrats can't accomplish all their goals in one session, he said.

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