

Rep. Smith hears desire for Measure 110 changes at listening session

By BERIT THORSON East Oregonian Feb 19, 2024 Updated Feb 19, 2024 0



Rep. Greg Smith, R-Heppner, discusses criminal penalties for drug use Feb. 17, 2024, at the Measure 110 listening session in Boardman.

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BOARDMAN — As the statewide debate over Measure 110 continues, Rep. Greg Smith, R-Heppner, asked members of the public from his district to offer their thoughts on the law.

Smith hosted a listening session Saturday, Feb. 17, at the Port of Morrow Riverfront Center in Boardman where he heard from law enforcement officials, emergency responders, parents, teachers and other residents about the effects of the ballot measure. Around 50 people attended in person, along with around 500 viewers tuning in via livestream throughout the meeting.

Smith was appointed to the Legislature's Joint Committee On Addiction and Community Safety Response, which figuring out what to do about Measure 110. As part of his new role, Smith said,

he is hearing from people around the state and wanted to make sure he heard from his own constituents.

Oregon voters in November 2020 passed Measure 110 with 58.5% support to decriminalize most drug possession, though most counties in Northeastern Oregon opposed its passage. While treatment was meant to be a central part of its proposed solution, opponents say that has not been the case in practice.

At the listening session, no proponents of Measure 110 spoke up. People instead supported reclassifying drug possession as Class A misdemeanors, which is what they had been before Measure 110.

Impact on othersMorrow County District Attorney Justin Nelson said since the measure passed, he has seen an uptick in property and theft crimes.

“To many people, it’s a health issue, not a criminal one,” he said. But with the increased crimes associated with the measure, he said, “You create a victim that might not have had to exist.”

Kimberly Lindsay, executive director of Community Counseling Solutions, said changing people’s behavior often requires an external consequence. With addiction, especially, it can take time and repeated effort.

“As Justin said, our district attorney, other people are being impacted by this drug use,” she said. “Crimes are being committed, schools are being impacted, kids are being impacted that are growing up in these homes.”

It’s important to have compassion for those struggling with addiction and be supportive of people seeking help, she emphasized.

“I want to say that treatment does work,” she said. “But we do need continued funding, so I hope that does happen.”

Lindsay said she supports establishing crisis resolution centers, which are similar to detoxification facilities — there is one in Pendleton — but offer more holistic support than just drug or alcohol treatment support.

Expanding the conversation Participants at the session mentioned two groups they believe often are left out of conversations about addiction: emergency responders and children.

One emergency medical services provider, Dave Hanson, with Umatilla County Fire District No. 1, said the measure is “shredding our budget because we have to go on so many calls that are a result of drug addiction or homelessness.”

Of around 7,000 calls they receive, he said, 15-20% involve homelessness or drug use.

“We’re not used to this volume that we’re going to as a result of drug addiction,” he said. “We can’t just talk about police departments, you’ve got to look at the first responders and most of the time, we’re left out.”

“My paradigm shifted a little bit because you’re exactly right on that,” Smith told Hanson. “I’m almost embarrassed to say our first responders, our emergency responders, have not been a part of the conversation, and it needs to be.”

The session also focused on the measure’s effects on school-aged children.

Umatilla County Commissioner Cindy Timmons read a letter from Jenni Galloway, Umatilla County CARE coordinator, whose work focuses on youth in schools.

“We are working with an increased number of parents with substance use disorders,” Timmons read aloud on Galloway’s behalf. “Locally, we are experiencing a higher number of referrals to the CARE program. . . . If we don’t have a call to action soon, I predict that we will see an increase in the harm in children.”

Local educators, including a teacher and a few school board members from Umatilla County, echoed Galloway’s statement, noting regular attendance has been down and truancy has increased since the pandemic and Measure 110 began.

They pointed out that accountability and attendance in school are an important part of keeping students on track to graduate and be successful.

“The vast majority of the conversation in Salem has focused on adults in need of treatment,” Smith said after the session. “And today we were reminded multiple times not to forget our kiddos.”

Proposing ideas Much of the comments in the listening session focused on the balance between accountability and compassion. People made comments suggesting consequences or how to pay for better treatment support.

Hermiston City Council President Doug Primmer proposed an incremental approach to punishment, such as for driving under the influence or cellphone use in a car.

“Keeping things illegal does stop some of the people, the casual users,” he said. “If we look at this from a stair-step approach, then we can possibly get the teeth back into the fact that we’re trying to fix a problem.”

He added a funding idea, too: using money from charging for plastic grocery bags. Umatilla County Commissioner Dan Dorran made a similar suggestion after noting how much money people receive by returning cans or bottles to grocery stores.

Boardman Police Chief Rick Stokoe, said a lot of law enforcement officers support making possession a Class A misdemeanor because of the sanctions that go with it.

“The answer is not putting somebody in jail to get rid of their addiction process,” he said. “You have to want to stop. ... It’s doable, but it doesn’t happen overnight.”

Instead of (or in addition to) jail, he advocated for more infrastructure, such as sobering centers like the crisis resolution centers Lindsay mentioned.

Without a mix of legal consequences and social support, Stokoe warned, overdose numbers are going to continue increasing.

Getting personal Along with the big-picture ideas, some people offered personal accounts to Smith.

Gilliam County Commissioner Pat Shannon shared some of his experience with addiction recovery. He has been sober for more than 32 years, he said.

“Recovery generally does not just happen,” he said. “Addiction happens fast, and recovery is extremely slow.”

Shannon suggested finding a way to include people who have been incarcerated and gotten sober as peer mentors, since they are the people who understand the struggle of addiction.

“A focus on prevention is essential, but more focus needs to be on peer support,” he said. “With that real life experience can come real life recovery.”

Jesse Roa, a Hermiston dad, also spoke up about his experience trying to help one of his sons who struggles with addiction.

“As a parent, our hands are tied,” he said. After doing what he felt was all he could do to help his son, he ran out of options.

“Eventually, I knew that the path was going to happen one or two ways,” Roa said. “Either I’m going to bury him or something’s going to happen, he’s going to be incarcerated.”

His son is now 18 and has been incarcerated twice since moving to Colorado with his mother.

Moving forwardSmith listened to every person who wanted to talk; the session lasted for more than two hours.

“The comments I’ve heard today are not the comments I’ve been hearing in Salem,” he told the crowd near the end of the session. “Part of our challenge is going to be to hold the line and make sure that anything that passes is to your will.”

He said he’d take their ideas and concerns back to the joint committee.

Smith after the session said he was “elated” by how the meeting went and was glad to hear people’s personal stories. He said he’d be compiling the top five things he heard at the session and drafting amendments to present to the committee co-chairs.

He emphasized he would be working to ensure anything that passes would include the will of his constituents.

“There’s no doubt that what’s going on in the metro area is very serious and needs to be addressed, and it’s not my place to tell them how to address their community,” he said. “And so if I can support them and what they think is right, I’m going to ask them to support me and what I think is right from what I heard today.”