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PHOTO BY LYNN HOWLETT



Sen. Kathleen Taylor and Rep. Court Boice have found common ground despite different backgrounds and drastically different constituencies. PHOTO BY LYNN HOWLETT

MILES APART, WORKING TOGETHER: OREGON LAWMAKERS BRIDGE THE DIVIDE

Sen. Kathleen Taylor and Rep. Court Boice represent far different constituencies but unite against a threat to all Oregonians: catastrophic wildfire.

By Ted Case

By all appearances, it is hard to find two Oregon legislative districts more distinct than those represented by Democratic Sen. Kathleen Taylor and Republican Rep. Court Boice.

Taylor's inner Southeast Portland district is compact and among the most politically progressive in the state. Boice represents a sprawling, rural district along Oregon's south coast that leans conservative.

Their backgrounds are just as different. "There is quite a contrast between us," Taylor said.

Elected to the Oregon Legislature in 2015, Taylor brought with her a degree in public policy from Rutgers University and years of experience as a public servant

focused on making government work more efficiently. Boice arrived at the state capitol in 2023 after a career largely spent outside government, running a tourist lodge and piloting jet boats on the Rogue River.

But appearances—geographic and personal—can be deceiving.

"As different as our districts are, we both struggle with similar issues: a lack of housing; drug addiction; and education needs," Taylor said.

Housing, in particular, weighs heavily on her as she has watched prices skyrocket in Portland neighborhoods that have attracted an influx of young professionals. While Boice remains committed to bridging the rural-urban divide, Taylor gives him credit for understanding Portland's outsized role in the state's economy.

"Court and I both strongly believe that Oregon is healthiest when Portland is healthy and thriving," she said.

Together, they represent a far less reported story in an increasingly polarized political environment: lawmakers from opposite parties deliberately working to find common ground.

"I connected with Sen. Taylor early on and recognized she was a real leader," Boice said. "She is well-respected and always willing to listen."

Taylor returned the compliment.

"Rep. Boice understands the issues of his district deeply," she said. "He is an effective, sincere advocate who is not interested in scoring political victories."

Boice, who chairs the Coastal Caucus, represents electric cooperatives whose



Rep. Boice describes the legislative process as guiding a jet boat through “shallow water, with sun in your eyes, and a heavy load aboard.”

PHOTO COURTESY OF JERRY'S ROGUE JETS

service territories are among the most heavily forested in the state.

“I really want to protect my co-ops because they have a long history of protecting their members’ rates in the face of extremely tough challenges,” he said.

One of those challenges—wildfire—cuts across partisan lines and has occupied countless hours of both lawmakers’ time.

“Rep. Boice’s passion to protect our forests and infrastructure from wildfire devastation strengthens CCEC’s mitigation plan and our ability to manage power line rights-of-way,” said Brent Bischoff, CEO of Coos-Curry Electric Cooperative, based in Port Orford.

Roseburg-based Douglas Electric Cooperative General Manager Keith Brooks echoed that assessment.

“Court has been a consistent ally in addressing wildfire risk and keeping essential services affordable for rural families,” he said.

Taylor, chair of the influential Senate Labor and Business Committee, has spent years immersed in wildfire policy, including service on the Senate Natural Resources and Wildfire Committee.

“The risks to electric cooperatives from wildfire cannot be any higher,” Taylor said, noting her work on policy reforms following the catastrophic 2020 fires.

“Sen. Taylor prides herself on making



Sen. Taylor, here on the Senate floor, has been a longstanding member of committees attempting to address the challenges posed by wildfires. PHOTO BY LYNN HOWLETT

policy that is good for all of Oregon—and she means it,” said Tucker Billman, ORECA’s director of government relations. “She has used her role on the Senate Natural Resources and Wildfire Committee to prioritize real solutions, including championing cutting-edge camera technology that can detect wildfires before they become catastrophic.”

The challenges remain immense, but both legislators draw optimism from their personal experience. Boice believes his more than 10,000 trips down the Rogue River prepared him for a tricky legislative

process—one he likens to guiding a boat through “shallow water, with the sun in your eyes, and a heavy load onboard.”

Taylor has spent her career navigating the turbulent waters of state and local government. Each time she takes her oath of office, Taylor said, she is struck by the awesome responsibility—and opportunities—it carries.

“When I take my oath, it is a pledge to all of Oregon,” Taylor said. “While I will fight like heck for my people and my district, I recognize that every other legislator is fighting just as hard for theirs.” ■