

## Front Page News

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# At town halls in Ashland and Grants Pass, Merkley calls support for Israel 'conditional'



JULIE ANDERSON / Daily Courier

U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley fields questions from the crowd at Rogue Community College's Redwood Campus in Grants Pass during his town hall meeting Sunday. Merkley addressed an array of issues, including affordable housing, border policy and overseas conflicts.

**By Cara Denney of the Daily Courier**

In town hall appearances Sunday in Ashland and Grants Pass, U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley said he supports Israel's ability to go after Hamas for the attack on Oct. 7, but called such support conditional because Israel is "not going about it the right way."

"The strategy of the Netanyahu government as employed in going after Hamas has not been targeted in the appropriate way and has produced a tremendous number of civilian casualties," Merkley said in Ashland.

"We now have more than 30,000 people dead, more than 20,000 women and children, and the set of humanitarian catastrophes that have cascaded one over the other, including shortage of food, clean water, shelter, communications, electric power, and medicine."

Merkley received applause at both meetings for his call for a cease-fire in Israel's war against Hamas, piggy-backed on increased humanitarian aid, such as the two shipments delivered last week to Gaza.

Merkley went on to say that the further expansion of Israeli settlers into the West Bank, along with the fighting, was a problem that could only be solved with a "two states solution."

"Two states, for two people, with a really good fence in between," Merkley said.

The conflict in Gaza and the war in Ukraine, along with the local issue of a shortage of affordable housing in Oregon, were on Merkley's list addressed at both town halls.

Questions from the public covered aspects of the senator's agenda, as well as rising home insurance and prescription medication costs.

Merkley spoke to a crowd of over 250 people at Ashland High School gymnasium at 12:30 p.m., followed by a town hall with about 100 people at Rogue Community College in Grants Pass starting at 3:30, with an hour's worth of question and answer time at each location. The town halls were the 542nd and 543rd that Merkley has held throughout every county in Oregon during his time in the Senate.

Merkley opened both meetings by honoring local nonprofits and their service to their communities — Rogue Food Unites in Ashland and the Women's Crisis Support Team in Grants Pass. He also recognized local leaders present with whom he had met with before

the public meeting, including state Rep. Pam Marsh and state Sen. Jeff Golden, both fellow Democrats, and Mayor Tonya Graham at the meeting in Ashland; and Josephine Community Library director Kate Lasky and Josephine County Commissioner Dan DeYoung in Grants Pass.

DeYoung said after the meeting that he appreciated the time to speak to Merkley about the things that concern Josephine County, including the loss of timber revenue for the area.

DeYoung, a former member of the Grants Pass City Council, also said that he and Merkley, a member of the powerful Senate Appropriations Committee, spoke of the need for federal funding for a new water treatment plant in Grants Pass, the cost of which has ballooned to an estimated \$123.8 million. Last week, the offices of Merkley and fellow Sen. Ron Wyden jointly announced a \$15 million package to help the city of Aumsville, near Salem, build a new water plant. The aid represents more than half the estimated cost of the project there.

The city is in the running for a massive \$50 million FEMA grant to help cover costs, but hasn't learned yet whether it will receive the federal funds, city of Grants Pass Public Works Director Jason Canady said Monday.

In Ashland questions from the public leaned slightly more international than in Grants Pass, with people scattered throughout the gym showing their support for Ukraine with T-shirts in the country's national colors and symbols and even a Ukrainian flag waved by Ashland resident Michael Sawicky.

Sawicky said he checked in monthly by phone with Ukrainians who have become friends after working with them online in the IT sector.

"My big concern is about support for Ukraine. I want Sen. Merkley to know that there are people out here that are supporting it and hope that there is a way to get that through as quickly as possible," Sawicky said of a monthslong impasse in Congress in approving a larger military aid package to the country. The U.S. has provided Ukraine with \$44.2 billion in military aid since Russia invaded two years ago.

If applause is any indicator, there was little such division among those present at both town hall locations regarding support for Ukraine or Merkley's position of calling for a cease-fire in Gaza. Merkley pivoted to the implications for local communities.

"There are deeply passionate views in different directions, and that at a minimum I think we can all agree that here in Oregon we need to fight anti-Semitism, Islamophobia or any other form of hate and prejudice and celebrate each other as neighbors and communities. Let's keep that framework in mind," he said.

In Grants Pass, Amber Biscarret said she might actually have to leave the community she's called home for most of her life because it is becoming increasingly too hard for her and other younger people to afford to live there.

"Who is overseeing this?" she asked Merkley. "It seems like if we're needing more money in the government and statewide, we just keep taxing the taxpayers. And I'm starting to think about moving. I don't know if I want to live here anymore."

Merkley responded to Biscarret's concerns, as well as questions of the growing number of homeless seniors, by bringing up a renewed version of his previously defeated bill that would prohibit hedge funds from buying up single-family houses, especially those up for sale due to foreclosures.

"We are losing a whole generation where home ownership was the biggest driver of middle class wealth," Merkley said.

Along with affordable housing, Merkley also spoke of the need to make childcare and prescription drugs less expensive.

"We, the folks who develop the drugs, get the worst prices in the world," Merkley said to a round of applause. American taxpayers and companies invest money in research and development for medications. But the U.S. severely restricts imports of medication, as

well as the government's ability to negotiate with companies over drug prices for taxpayer-funded health programs — limiting competition and driving up prices.

He pointed to "tribal animosity" between political parties and the Senate's tradition of the filibuster as the hindrance to getting bills passed to address the high price of prescription drugs and many other issues. The filibuster is a Senate rule — not part of the Constitution or any other law — requiring a supermajority vote on many bills, rather than a straight majority.

Merkley said he has fought for revisions to the filibuster allowances and called for a return to "legislation by simple majority, with a super majority only in special circumstances."

The senator also addressed questions about the skyrocketing cost of insurance in areas like Southern Oregon that have been hit hard by wildfires in recent years.

Merkley spoke of various fire prevention options for homeowners and said that, unfortunately, he didn't know of any insurance companies that gave consideration to home owners who take precautions to reduce their risk of fire, similar to "good driver discounts" with car insurance.

After the meeting, Merkley said that he was unaware of the recent decision of the Josephine County Board of Commissioners to eliminate a requirement for fire protection for new home construction except in forest lands. The commissioners have suggested the Oregon Department of Forestry can provide structure protection, something the agency, which fights wildland fires, says it is not trained or equipped to do.

"I know sometimes they can use a 'wrap' for homes to deflect the fire, but that's for like an isolated cabin in the woods," said Merkley, a longtime Portland resident who was born in Douglas County, adding "so what are they expecting people to do for fire protection?"

In response to a question about the crush of immigrants at the nation's southern border, Merkley gave an overview of the back and forth negotiations between Republicans and Democrats, noting some improvements in the system, but with no real clear path forward.

"The rule of law is now broken and needs to be restored. We need to get the politics out of it and take these various common sense measures in moving forward and work together. I thought we were coming close a few weeks ago, but now I think we have to look at 2025 as the opportunity to try again."

"Who would have ever thought we'd see the craziness of January 6th?" Merkley said, adding, "We've seen very dark times and we've found our way out of it, and we will again."

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