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Democrats halt House action with boycott

By Charles E. Beggs

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Democrats brought half of the Oregon Legislature to a halt Monday by refusing to meet until majority Republicans back off in a fight over redistricting.

Protesting lawmakers haven't shut down a session so dramatically since 1971, when Senate Democrats' left the Capitol in a dispute over ratifying the federal constitutional amendment allowing 18-year-olds to vote.

House Minority Leader Dan Gardner of Portland said the Democrats would refuse to provide a quorum to do business until Republicans scrap a tactic to push through a redistricting plan that would bypass Democratic Gov. John Kitzhaber.

Two-thirds of the 60 House members, or 40, have to be present to do business. Republicans control the chamber on a 32-27 count, with one independent.

Gardner, D-Portland, said only two Democrats came to the Capitol on Monday.

If a redistricting plan is not enacted by June 30, which is Saturday, the state constitution says the task of redrawing legislative districts goes to Secretary of State Bill Bradbury, a Democrat.

Lawmakers have adopted a Republican-backed plan for reshaping legislative districts that's opposed by all Democrats, and Kitzhaber says he won't sign any plan that lacks bipartisan support.

Among other reasons, Democrats oppose the GOP plan because it eliminates a House district along the coast that often has elected Democrats. Also, Democrats say the plan dilutes urban voting strength by dividing too many small cities.

Republicans pushed a measure out of committee Friday that put the GOP-backed plan into a resolution, which unlike a bill wouldn't go to the governor.

Gardner said a law can't be passed without the governor participating.

"House Democrats refuse to be a party to an unconstitutional Legislature that reinvents rules to suit its needs," he told a news conference. "We hope that the speaker will come to his senses and allow us to get back to the business of the state."

House Speaker Mark Simmons had no immediate comment on the development.

Gardner produced a written opinion from Greg Chaimov, the Legislature's chief lawyer, that says although the state constitution is not clear on the issue, "the most persuasive reading" is that the Legislature must reapportion legislative districts through a bill that is subject to veto.

Senate Majority Leader Dave Nelson, R-Pendleton, called the walkout "absolutely irresponsible."

Senate Democratic Leader Kate Brown, D-Portland, called the House Democrats' actions "very appropriate under the circumstances."

"Under certain circumstances, it's fair to say we would use all tools available to us" and stage a similar boycott, she said.

Legislative districts have to be redrawn after each 10-year federal Census to reflect population shifts. Gardner said he was refusing his \$85 per day expense payment that's given during sessions and was urging other Democrats to do the same.