

Brown seeks added bite for ethics panel

We've spent a lot of time in previous editorials talking about Gov. Kate Brown's praiseworthy proposal to review the state of Oregon's public-records laws. Such an audit is long-overdue, assuming that it leads to specific proposals to plug some of the holes in Oregon's records laws, once among the nation's strongest but no longer.

The records audit is part of Brown's plan to restore public trust in Oregon government in the wake of the ethics allegations that prompted the resignation of Gov. John Kitzhaber.

We haven't spent much time discussing another part of Brown's plan: Adding some teeth to the Oregon Government Ethics Commission. Such a move also is long overdue, and we like the sound of almost all of the governor's proposals regarding the commission.

It was nearly painful, watching the

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commission try to investigate the influence-peddling charges against Kitzhaber's fiancée and Oregon's presumptive first lady, Cylvia Hayes. Until Kitzhaber's resignation, it was a possibility (albeit, we suspect, a remote one) that the commission could have determined that Hayes was not a public figure and therefore outside its jurisdiction. And it took months for the commission to get to even that point.

As it turned out, when Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum announced that her office had launched a criminal investigation — and federal investigators quickly followed suit — state law required the Ethics Commission to suspend its investigation.

All in all, not the sort of performance

that inspired confidence in the work of the Ethics Commission.

Brown is making a number of recommendations regarding the commission, including these three:

- Reduce the time allowed for the commission to decide whether to investigate a complaint. These investigations have tended to drag on for months; surely these deadlines can be tightened.

- Eliminate the governor's prerogative to directly appoint three of the commission's members. This seems like a wise move as well.

- Create an online tracking system to improve case management and presumably allowing greater public review of the progress of these investigations.

Those all make sense. We're still weighing the pros and cons of the fourth proposal, which would remove the requirement that an Ethics Commission

investigation must cease when a criminal investigation is launched. In those cases, our sense is that the criminal investigation must take precedence — and the subjects of the investigation likely will want to focus on the criminal case as well. But we're open to hearing additional arguments on both sides of this issue.

Brown also is proposing a variety of other common-sense changes to the law, including one that would have saved the Ethics Commission months: Making it clear that the first lady (or, more accurately, the first spouse) is, in fact, a public official.

Rebuilding trust in Oregon's state government won't happen overnight. It's likely going to require many small steps. The proposals that Brown plans to present to the Legislature offer a number of those small steps, and they're steps in the right direction.