Legislative limelights . . .

Sales tax raise idea faces cool reception

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Even Idaho Gov. John V. Evans must know there is little chance the 1980 Legislature will seriously consider raising the state's sale tax in view of the elections later in the year.

Evans said he favored raising the tax to offset the 1 percent limit on property taxes if local governments can convince the public to support an increase.

That's a clever way of putting it but from all comments heard so far bulk of the people don't at this time appear to favor any tax increase, whether it be sales, income, property or any other.

The governor pointed out correctly that this is the revenue route to take if local services are going to hurt severely.

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The political complexities are against any sales tax increase in the second half of the 45th regular session to convene in January.

Evans can safely suggest a sales tax increase because he was elected for a four-year term in 1975 and it doesn't expire for three years more.

That's not the case for the 105 legislators — 35 senators and 70 state representatives — who were elected for two year terms.

They realize if they did enact a sales tax increase of 1 cent over the present 3 cents per dollar they face the voters soon after the session adjourns.

Next year, the situation is even more sensitive as the primary election has been moved up to the fourth Tuesday of May from the usual August and what the lawmakers accomplish or did not accomplish will be fresh on the minds of voters.

The Legislature usually adjourns in late March which gives them less than two months for campaigning. The filing falls on the first week in April which forces them to make up their mind quickly after the Legislature quits as to whether they will seek re-election. In former years they had until July to file for the August primary.

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There is little question that Evans' suggestion carries merits and Idaho people can expect a sales or state income tax increase, or maybe a combination of both.

The most strategic time to do this, however, would be in the first half of the 46th session in 1981 when the harried lawmakers don't face election.

Evans also advances another excellent proposal for broadening the sales tax to include some services currently exempt from the sales tax, although this wouldn't raise much income.

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The legislators, however, can solve part of the problem by allowing the cities or counties to enact local option taxes. These are subject to a vote of the people affected and certainly should not encounter opposition. Evans urged this last year and even threatened to call a special summer session of the Legislature.

Why legislators refuse to grant cities more autonomy has always been a puzzle. The cities run a far better financial program than does the Legislature, and perhaps this might explain the reason — the jealousy factor.

Most state lawmakers say they are fearful that if they did this the people would hold them responsible. This argument doesn't appear meritable because the people affected would vote on any local option tax proposal.