

Protection of vested interest poses worry

By BEN J. PLASTINO
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The antics of many legislators, particularly the Republican leadership, to protect their vested interest, is a cause for worry.

Idaho lawmakers face frightful financial problems and their oft-repeated statements that nothing in state government is sacred from reduction should apply equally to all sectors.

In these dreadful times of shortfall, the leadership should look on ways to raise revenue from all segments of industry, not just the lowly taxpayer. Cutbacks should be fairly distributed.

It's painfully clear the large private utilities, corporations and other groups with well-heeled lobbyists have too much influence. These lobbyists bring considerable pressure by hosting legislators at dinners, luncheons, receptions and other socials during most of the session, especially in the early days.

The first major tax the Legislature enacted was the 1 cent sales tax increase, a move that was justified. Nevertheless it was against the average taxpayers' wishes. It is highly probable another cent hike will be added.

Yet, these same legislators are avoiding the governor's recommendations for repeal of the Job Credit, Investment Credit; and especially the corporate tax benefits enacted last year. The corporate tax action could bring in more than \$30 million and the other two at least \$5 million each.

A subcommittee under Rep. Rich Orme,

R-St. Anthony, has studied these alternatives but they have received scant attention from the leadership so far.

Another possibility is restriction of loss carryback, which would chip in \$2.5 million, advance income tax payments, and others.

Lawmakers voted a freeze on benefit payments for jobless workers, froze salaries for state employees, reduced unemployment benefits but have taken no action yet to lift some sales tax exemptions which benefit their vested interests.

Legislators instead are veering the opposite direction. For example, they are looking at proposals to thwart the will of the people by crippling the so-called 50-50 Tax Initiative passed in the November election.

It is only the fear that this would lead to defeat in 1984 that stops many legislators.

Among the leaders seeking repeal or crippling amendments are Reps. Gordon Hollifield, R-Jerome; Walter E. Little, R-New Plymouth; John Brooks, R-Gooding, and others.

The initiative gives residential property owners a tax exemption on their property's value up to 50 percent, or \$50,000, whichever is less.

Figures from the State Tax Commission show that from 1976 through 1982, residential taxes went up \$63.4 million. At the same time, the total for other property rose \$5 million. The initiative shifts about \$19 million which was unfairly taxed from residential property owners.

Many legislators seek to thwart voters' will

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Increasing concern must be manifested in the way many legislators wish to override the will of the people as expressed in their passage of initiatives.

The voters approved these initiative because they did not get the satisfaction from the Legislators. They were thus forced to go to the people and in most cases signed petitions and voted for these initiatives.

It is the one weapon left for the people when so many lawmakers who are captives of the vested interests refuse to pass laws that are for the best public interest.

Yet, many of the lawmakers in all their wisdom have not got the message and feel their own judgment is superior to those of their constituents.

The latest effort is aimed at the Residential Tax Exemption but similar efforts have been launched against the sales tax originally voted exclusively for education, the so-called Sunshine Law to require financial campaign reporting and the 1 Percent Initiative.

These were laws approved by the people and should be sacred but there are many legislators who are continually sniping and seeking to nullify them. They have weakened the sales tax, Sunshine Law and 1 Percent Initiative.

The 1 Percent Initiative admittedly had to be altered because its language did not fit Idaho. This initiative was not written properly to address the tax target in Idaho which had in reality triggered the 1 percent movement — and that was the tax shift to homes. Now that the public finally has focused on the right target, legislators want to nullify it.

Now, there is a full-fledged attack against the Residential Tax Exemption, known commonly as the 50-50 Initiative because it requires an exemption of \$50,000 or 50 percent, whichever is less.

Two other initiatives were passed last year which have escaped the attack of legislators. One includes a law licensing denturists and another prohibiting the Legislature outlawing

nuclear power without a vote of the people.

A law proposed by Sen. Vearl Crystal, R-Rigby, struck at the heart of the initiative process. It would have required that no more than 20 percent of the people from any one county could sign an initiative. This was aimed against the urban counties, such as Ada, Bonneville, Canyon, Bannock, Twin Falls and Nez Perce which in large part put over the initiatives. Fortunately, this bill was defeated in the Senate.

In Crystal's defense, he said he felt a more representative view should be culled from the smaller counties rather than confined to the city folks. It is, of course, far easier to get petition signatures in the more congested areas than the rural sections.

Rep. Gordon Hollifield, R-Jerome, wants the 50-50 initiative repealed outright. Rep. Rachel Gilbert, R-Boise, would strip it of 75 percent of its powers and there are a number of others bills that would water it down.

It's their argument the people don't know what they are voting for which is a familiar one for the defeatists.

It was Sen. John Peavey, D-Carey, who almost single-handed and spent much of his own money who brought about the Sunshine Initiative after the Senate refused to pass it in 1974.

Similarly it was Ken Robison, a struggleline Boise weekly newspaper editor, who led the fight for the 50-50 against tremendous odds last year. But there were thousands of people who volunteered time and money to pass the initiative despite the opposition of the public utilities and well-heeled corporations.

Robison noted the residential taxpayers are already paying, through their state taxes, for the \$19 million in tax relief provided by the initiative. The initiative passed in the November election became law Jan. 1.

This is an off election year but the people have long memories on such important issues. They should remember those legislators who seek to override the will of the majority as expressed at the polls.