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The political pulse

Legislative limelights . . .

Idaho Legislature could adjourn early

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Talk in the legislative halls is optimistic this session of the 47th Idaho Legislature will end in 60 days or or less.

These rumors aren't unusual; butthis year there are a number of signs that will happen this year. If it does happen, it would be the first time in a long time; the record was 55 days in 1970.

The legislators could meet their 60-day goal by adjourning March 11, or two days later on March 13.

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The two paramount issues that have delayed the Legislature in recent years — but this session appear for early settlement — are revenue projection and state employee salaries.

Gov. John V. Evams came up with a revenue estimate of $467.2 million while the Legislative Revenue Projection Committee predicted $463.4 million. This is only a difference of $3.8 million, hardly enough to bare their teeth.

Last year, the governor estimated $438 million while the legislature predicted $422 million, a wide difference of $16 million. It sparked a bitter fight, sending the legislature into long overtime.

The governor has recommended a 5 percent public employee salary increase, plus a 1.5 percent merit pay, figures most legislators generally accept. The only scrap possible on this is the 1.5 percent merit pay.

Controversy came up only last week when a legislative committee favored the 5 percent and up to 1.5 percent merit increase, but it only approved $8.1 million from the general fund to pay for them. The governor's office said it would take $10.3 million, meaning the merit pay hike may be scrapped.

Last year, the major delay was caused by salaries. Legislators passed a 7 percent increase for state employees but appropriated only $4 million which resulted in cutting more than 300 workers, mostly from the Department of Health and Welfare.

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The all important Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee is not progressing any faster than usual but it also doesn't face the financial headaches of the past. The committee finished its action on supplemental requests Wednesday and will now turn to the request from the state agencies. This is suppose to be completed in 45 days, but that deadline has been met in two decades. It might be possible this year.

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Talks has been rife in recent years for return to biennial sessions but as the state has grown and the budget increases, this appears out of the question now. There still appears proposals for biennial budgeting for one year and to handle all other matters except financial on alternate years.

There were biennial sessions from 1890 to 1967 but there were special sessions during that time on many occasions, in 1912, 1931, three in 1935-36, one in 1937, two in 1944, two in 1946, one each in 1950, 1952, 1961, 1964, and 1965 and two in 1966.

Records show a regular session of 75 days and 14 days special session on reapportionment in 1981; and 85 days special session, the third longest in history; and three days special session for welfare, Medicaid, highway and biennial funding, in 1980.

Other recent sessions include 78 days in 1979, 69 in 1978, 71 in 1977, 75 in 1976, 68 in 1975, 76 in 1974, 65 in 1973, 75 in 1972, 69 regular and 18 days special for reapportionment in 1971.

The record was the first session when Idaho assumed statehood in 1890 which spanned 97 days but it was officially in session only 82 days. Up until the start of the 1970s, most sessions finished in 60 days, or within five days of that. The second longest was 83 in 1967 if the 1890 split session is not considered.