

Rep. Sessions receives strong support

By BEN J. PLASTINO
Post-Register columnist

Ready to begin serving his 10th two-year term, a veteran legislator from tiny Teton County can look back on an amazing record of achievement.

Rep. John O. Sessions, R-Driggs, who has served as chairman of the House Transportation and Defense Committee 16 of his 18 years as a lawmaker, has toiled in the House.

He is a catalyst John O. Sessions behind Idaho's highway program, especially that in eastern Idaho, which was behind in highway improvements and construction until he took over.

He is one of the few legislators who comes from one of the state's smallest counties, yet he finds support in neighboring Bonneville County because of his accomplishments.

"I guess I could have tried for some House leadership position, but I feel I can be of more use to my district and the state as chairman of the Transportation and Defense Committee," he said.

Between 1969 and 1984 while serving on the committee, Sessions was instrumental in obtaining least \$150 million in highway improvements for eastern Idaho, exclusive of Teton flood damage costs. For those, federal and state government poured in millions of dollars to repair high-



Rep.

ways damaged when the dam burst in June 1976.

Furthermore, at least 13 major projects, estimated to cost at least \$55 million, are on the drawing board and will be started in 1985 through 1987.

Work already has begun on the 4.4-mile Granite Hill relocation on 4.4 at a cost of \$4,466,931, mostly in federal funds; and on 5.3 miles of the Clementsville road in Teton County at a cost of \$2,464,538.

In 1967 when he began his first term, Sessions won a seat on the Joint Finance-Appropriation Committee. He served on the transportation committee and became its chairman in 1969. House rules prohibited him from being on JFAC and being a committee chairman simultaneously.

The highway projects have provided hundreds of jobs and have generated many dollars for purchase of supplies and equipment within the state. Cities and counties have received a lot of money through the allocation formula as result of the burgeoning highway program.

The Transportation and Defense Committee's responsibilities aren't limited to highway projects. They cover law enforcement, State Police, traffic safety, and the state's Military Department, and all aspects of motor vehicle operations: registrations, driver licensing, driver training and motor carrier operations. In the latter governs duels and use taxes, permits, reciprocity agreements and Ports of Entry operations.

"It has been necessary on several occasions to raise additional taxes to adequately fund the ongoing highway improvement programs," Sessions

said. "As additional highway dollars were needed we have almost always turned to motor fuels tax increases, rather than increasing car and truck registration fees."

He said registration fees increased 21 percent in 1981, but otherwise the tax increases have been on motor fuels.

"By taxing motor fuels, the tax is paid according to how much a person uses the highways," he said.

Sessions said 30 percent of the fuel tax revenues are paid by tourists and out-of-state operators who use Idaho highways. Registration fees, he said, are among the lowest in the nation.

"Without these additional funds many of these important east Idaho projects would not have been completed," he said.

He said the Idaho Transportation Board generally has been fair in allocation of highway improvements throughout the state and that eastern Idaho has received its just share.

Sessions listed eastern Idaho highway projects completed or under way during his term in their order of importance as serving the greatest number of people:

- Completion of I-15 through Idaho Falls.
- Completion of U.S. 20, Rigby to Chester, especially eliminating the old Thornton overpass.
- Anderson Street-Lewisville Highway project in Idaho Falls.
- Widening North Yellowstone Highway between Idaho Falls and Beeches Corner.
- Highway 26 projects west of Swan Valley, including replacement of the old Snake River bridge and widening the highway eastward.

- Competition of I-15 northward.
- Improvement of Highway 26 from Idaho Falls to INEL and Arco.
- Improvement of Highway 33 from Rexburg west and from Newdale east.
- Broadway Bridge in Idaho Falls.
- 17th Street underpass in Idaho Falls.
- New traffic signals on Yellowstone Highway in Idaho Falls.

Sessions said he appreciates that Idahoans generally have supported providing additional highway revenues when needed. He also gave a pat on the back to the news media, which has backed additional funding.

In some years, he noted, inflation alone increased highway construction costs from 15 to 20 percent in some areas. As the news media pointed this out, the public generally responded in providing the additional needed dollars, he said.

"In my opinion," he said, "a good safe highway network and efficient transportation system is second in importance only to a good efficient education system in our society today."

Sessions is a soft-spoken businessman who is low-key about his legislative chores. But he has earned the respect of his colleagues on both sides of the aisle. In fact, Democrats generally support his programs enthusiastically.

He and his wife, Alice, live in Driggs. Sessions says he considers himself in semi-retirement. He lets his sons run most of his enterprises, although he keeps a hand in the operations.