

Legislative limelights . . .

Legislature beginning confirms dull outlook

Wed. Jan 9 1980

By BEN J. PLASTINO

Post-Register political editor

The opening remarks by Gov. John V. Evans and of legislative leaders confirm generally the 1980 session will be a replay of the dull 1979 gathering.

Evans unveiled nothing new in his State of the State message Monday afternoon, which traditionally opens the Legislature. Legislative leaders and others repeated what they have said since a year ago — they're not going to do anything more than they have to.

It must be remembered this stale situation resulted from the 1 Percent Tax Initiative voted by the people in the 1978 election. When they did this, they, in effect, took much of the financial authority away from the legislators. Thus the legislators seem to be taking the view of "you people wanted this and that's what you're going to get."

Whatever many legislative leaders say to the contrary, the recommendations of Evans and most of the veteran legislators for extending the tax freeze another year probably will be enacted. It is likely a growth and inflation factor will be allowed, such as the governor and some legislators have advocated.

This compromise looms loud and clear because from the many conflicting statements emanating at the Statehouse there appears no unanimity in resolving the financial dilemma of the local units of government otherwise.

With the May 25 primary election, just two months after the Legislature adjourns, the lawmakers, in all their wisdom, aren't going to be saddled with the onus that they are responsible for a general tax increase — or any kind of tax increase, whether it be sales or income.

Perhaps they may go for a modest gas tax and vehicle registration hike but this is limited to the car owners who are the ones who use the highways for which the gas tax and vehicle fee revenue is earmarked.

The governor's State of the State message unveiled nothing new, largely substantiating the outlook of no innovations this year.

The lawmakers in this session are the same ones who served last year. It can be assumed they won't change their outlook — in fact, it may become even more conservative and regressive with an election confronting them upon their return.

The governor sits in an enviable position as his term doesn't expire for two more years. His backing for a full-fledged Department of Energy — which he won't get — and gas tax and vehicle license jump — part of which he might get — carry little political overtone for the 1980 elections.

With the 1980 elections coming, this session will be more politically conscious, but it has appeared that regardless of what they do, it is rare indeed for an incumbent to be defeated if he seeks re-election. With few exceptions, they have no need to worry, even if their performance is shabby as it often is.

The Senate, with a narrow 19-16 edge for the Republicans, has been more partisan than the House. There are still enough moderates who can join the Democrats on some issues but such a coalition had little reason to function last year.

The House with a topheavy 50-20 Republican majority has a different problem.

What happens in such a case

is a division of the Republicans who then join with Democrats on some issues. This happened frequently in the last session when some 15 to 20 Republican moderates joined Democrats in enacting some legislation. This practice even spilled over into the important 20-member Joint Finance Approval Committee where four moderates merged with seven Democrats to approve some financial measures.