

Legislative limelights . . .

Department of Energy plan appears doomed

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Gov. John V. Evans' offer that Robert Lenaghan step down as head of the Office of Energy if necessary to gain legislative approval of a proposed Department of Energy appears a desperate gesture.

Views expressed earlier by the vast majority of East Idaho legislators opposed such a department, not so much because of Lenaghan, but because of financial considerations and lack of performances.

Most of the lawmakers commented with some justification that the Office of Energy had done little to help alleviate the energy crunch. Kirk Hall left the office last year and the capable but controversial Lenaghan was named the acting director.

Certainly the governor must have known that such a move wouldn't help his proposal for a full-fledged department.

The vigorous Lenaghan ruffled Republican feathers as president of the Idaho Public Utilities Commission by turning that agency into an agency more representative of the consumer rather than a virtual pawn of the public utilities.

His outspoken views brought about his defeat for confirmation on a straight party line vote, 16-19, but the action placed the Senate Republicans in a defensive position for most of the 1979 session. In fact, they almost tripped over themselves to hurriedly confirm Lenaghan's successor, Perry Swisher, barely without a hearing.

The main opposition to the Department of Energy, based on statements of the legislators, centers on the increased financial cost and what they feel is lack of performance. Of course, it has become a partisan issue, which is unfortunate.

In East Idaho, only two Democrats, Sen. Israel Merrill, Blackfoot, and Rep. C. Wendell Miller, Idaho Falls, favored the department.

A third Democrat, conservative Sen. Richard A. Egbert, Teton, expressed doubt that such legislation could be passed. He favored direction towards a commission, commenting a department would

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give the office too much stature. This likely reflects the thinking of most legislators, right or wrong.

All the Republicans opposed the department and they admitted Lenaghan's presence might have influenced their thinking, but this was secondary.

Rep. John O. Sessions, R-Driggs, expressed one of the more positive approaches by saying he might favor a full-fledged department on a limited basis, but opposes one that would cost \$400,000.

Sen. Dane Watkins, R-Idaho Falls, who has been a leading advocate of gasohol and other alternative sources of energy, said his opposition is based on the grounds that such a department would not produce any more energy in Idaho. He added it could give someone the opportunity to add bureaucrats.

One of the underlying reasons for opposition is the U.S. Department of Energy, which had disseminated so many regulations as to stifle energy development. Sen. Vearl C. Crystal, R-Rigby, touched on this point, saying there is a need to loosen the federal regulation stranglehold.

Rep. Doyle C. Miner, R-St. Anthony, said such a department would end up with federal funding, indicating it would lose state control. But would the state lose control?

Most legislators say other departments could well handle the energy situation.

Two key legislators who wield tremendous influence strongly oppose the proposed department, Senate President Pro Tem Reed Budge, R-Soda Springs, and House Speaker Ralph Olmstead, R-Twin Falls.

Budge, in expressing an emphatic no, said the energy business could be handled as a bureau under another depart-

ment. He said the matter of fuel allocation would be federally dictated, anyway.

Olmstead said "until we see some changes made I favor zero budget for that agency (Department of Energy)." What he meant by that is unclear, whether it means the ouster of Lenaghan or a different type of administration.

Future development might dictate changes but it likely won't be in this session.

If people clamor for expanded energy development it might bring pressure to the legislators and perhaps some initiative might be inaugurated along this line. This happened on the sales tax, the Sunshine Law and 1 Percent Initiative.

Every initiative that is passed irrevocably takes power away from the Legislature. The 1 percenter has now restricted the once proud legislative body to rubber stamping limited budgets.