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The political pulse

E-2

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Legislative limelights . . .

Legislative redistrict faces partisan battle

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Legislative reapportionment, which was supposed to have been settled in the July special session, may become a bitter partisan struggle in the 1982 Legislature and could set the tone for the political campaign.

This appears probable in view of Republican leaders' refusal to participate in a proposed bipartisan committee to work on redistricting.

In the July special session, the Legislature completed its congressional reapportionment by transferring some 21,500 from the 1st to the 2nd congressional district.

Democratic Gov. John V. Evans vetoed the only reapportionment bill submitted to him, contending there were pro-Republican boundaries in the Boise and Pocatello districts, and that the differential of more than 5 percent among some districts was too excessive.

The governor's contentions along this line, however, are open to questions because of the difficult tasks the legislators face in seeking to equalize the 35 legislative districts.

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Soon after the special session adjourned, the governor proposed the bipartisan committee to come up with a recommendation. Under the plan, both majority and minority leaders in each chamber and the chairmen of each party would each name a member of the bipartisan committee and these six would then name the seventh and key member as the chairman.

The Democrats readily accepted but the Republicans have expressed objections. House Speaker Ralph Olmstead, R-Twin Falls, an announced gubernatorial candidate, said he was not supportive of the idea.

Republican Idaho Party Chairman Dennis M. Olsen said it was "ill-advised and counter productive."

He added he couldn't see how a seven-member bipartisan commission that is not funded could be less partisan than the Legislature, and further, that there are only one or two legislative districts disputed so why consider the entire state all over again?

This committee would make its recommendations which would then be acted on by the Legislature, which, of course, could make any changes, it wanted.

It looked like a good idea for a starting point but the Republican objections could bring a stalemate in the next session to convene in January.

Senate Minority Leader Ron Twilegar, D-Boise, who has taken a lead in the reapportionment process, expressed regrets the Republicans are not cooperating, pointing out the

Republican controlled Legislature will have the final say on what final plan is approved and sent to the governor. Twilegar said he had appointed Gail Bray, an active League of Women Voters member, as his representative.

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A story appearing elsewhere on this page shows less than half of the states have completed their legislative and congressional redistricting, and many of those approved, are under court challenges. Thus, Idaho is on par nationwide with most of the states, after having completed the congressional redistricting.

Even now, most legislators, and this includes Democrats, agree that whatever plan is adopted will show only slight changes from that passed in the special session. No matter what plan is drafted there are always a few who are dissatisfied and feel they have been unfairly treated, and this included the vetoed proposal.

Most legislators, and this includes some Democrats, privately feel the gubernatorial veto was unjustified because the controversy centered on only one or two legislative districts of the 35 in the state. There was no sign of blatant gerrymandering which is a term used for setting grotesque boundaries to favor one party.

The main struggle will center in District 33, made up of south Bannock, Oneida and Power counties; and in the Boise area to give urban or primarily Democratic voters, a greater voice. Boise legislators complained with justification that instead of giving the city and extra district outright, parts of the urban areas were placed in three outlying rural areas.

The objections of Sen. Bert Marley, D-McCannan, to including Republican Power county in his district were the main issues in the Pocatello area.

It is obvious the Legislature is rurally controlled as witnessed by the repeated action of discrimination against city oriented legislation. This should be considered in adjusting reapportionment so that the cities get a fairer representation than they now have.

Yet, in looking at the overall picture there is no reason to believe that the Boise urban voters could not dominate in the new districts, rather than the rural lawmakers. Furthermore, there is no reason that Marley hasn't as good a chance as his Republican adversary in winning Power County, a county in which Democratic Sen. Chick Bilyeu, Pocatello, ran well. If the more partisan legislators and leaders could compromise, these differences should be settled quickly—but likely won't be.