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Section D

Legislative limelights...

46th Idaho Legislature progress above normal

BY BEN J. PLASTINO
Post-Register political editor

BOISE — The 46th Idaho Legislature's progress appears slightly ahead of normal but faces the hurdle of settling the public employee salary increase problem before it can go ahead with other business.

The House passed three resolutions last week intended to give the employees an 8 percent salary raise, plus 2 percent merit hike, but with only a \$4 million funding.

This, however, has met the objections of the Senate Republican leaders who feel the 6.5 percent jump, plus 1 percent merit pay boost, is enough. This is close to the figures recommended by Gov. John V. Evans.

Both the Senate and House figures, however, would cause the termination of public employees, the figures estimated from 350 to 1,000, depending who is making the estimates.

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Both the Senate and House Republican leaders are not honest with themselves because the \$4 million funding is far from adequate for the 13,000 employees. It is a backdoor approach to cutting the employees.

Steve Swadley, executive director of the Idaho Public Employee Association, estimated the House figures would lop off between 700 and 1,000

employees, while those of the Senate likely would amount to half the number. He said it would take \$15.5 million to fund the public employee increase, or \$11.5 million short of what the House has asked.

Legislative leaders contend there are at least 250 existing vacancies and the impact would not be that great. Some insist there would need to be only a few employees terminated, that natural attrition from retirement and those voluntarily leaving jobs would account for most of the reduction.

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The charge by House Minority Leader Melvin Hammond, D-Rexburg, that the House Republican leaders took an arrogant approach in ramming through three resolutions for the public employee salary increase carries considerable merit. Hammond contends the resolutions were placed on the lawmaker's desk only a few minutes before the voting and only a select few—meaning the Republican leaders — knew about it.

Why the Republicans take such an antagonistic approach to state public employees, who in most cases are loyal and dedicated, has been puzzling. It appears so unnecessary. For the most part they are not of that strong partisan nature but the Republicans are forcing them to the Democratic fold whether they want to go there or not.