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Batt urges abandoning school district freeze

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BOISE — Lt. Gov. Philip E. Batt advised Wednesday that school districts abandon the budget freeze and levy the full amount permitted to get their maximum total appropriation.

He said local assessors, in response to a court order, strove to assess all property equally, but in the meantime failed to reappraise property according to its current inflated values.

"The 1 percent initiative changed all that," he said. "In attempting to implement the measure, the Legislature demanded that all property be put on the rolls at true 1978 value.

"This resulted in a tremendous increase in total valuation within some counties. To prevent runaway tax increases, the Legislature prohibited any increase in total tax collections within a taxing unit as a result of the 1 percent implementation.

"This is a mixed blessing. The 1 percent accomplished one beneficial purpose. Everyone is now assessed at approximately the same basis."

He said this created another inequity.

"Some school districts are levying the maximum 17 mills required for full participation in the state school funding formula. Others, due to crash reappraisal programs, levy less than 9 mills before they are controlled by the legislation freeze."

In advising the abandonment of the freeze, he said "unless we allow reasonable financing of schools from a local base, we will wipe out all local control. The school boards, if the state assumes almost all funding for public schools, will eventually take their marching orders from Boise. This would be a tragedy, considering the fine record the boards have in directing the role of schools to fit local conditions."

He said an alternative plan would be to allow local units to levy non-property taxes.

He added, however, "the dislocation which would result could be considerable. If one town levied a sales tax and its neighbor didn't, sale of major items would migrate to the non-taxer.

"The three-legged stool of taxation on property, income, and sales has done a good job for us over the years while maintaining local control of our schools. We need to loosen the strait jacket on the local units so that this system can continue."

He noted the primary impetus for passage of the 1 percent property tax limitation was to express a general protest against governmental growth at all levels.

"Almost equally important as a causative factor for the initiative was a feeling that property tax is inherently inequitable," he said. "Nothing galls a person more than paying a stiffer tax than his neighbor on like property."