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Legislative limelights

JFAC will assume more important role

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The Joint Finance Appropriation Committee is undoubtedly the most important of the nine in the Senate and 13 in the House but this coming year it will take on an even more important role because of the deepening state financial crisis triggered by a recession.

This committee under law is supposed to have its financial chores completed by the 45th day but it has never done so for at least 20 years. More often than not, it even acts up to the final week of the Legislature.

The Legislature by law is supposed to complete its deliberations in 60 days. It has never done so since its birth when Idaho assumed statehood in 1890, except seven times, the last time in 1961. They struggled for 73 days in 1982; 75, plus 14 days for reapportionment, in 1981; the third longest of 85 in 1980, 78 in 1979, 69 in 1978, 71 in 1977 and 75 in 1976.

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The JFAC is actually a merger of the Senate Finance Committee and the House Appropriation Committee, each consisting of 10 members, or total of 20. This is almost a fifth of the 105 legislators.

The chairman of the House Appropriation Committee, Rep. Kitty Gurnsey, R-Boise, and chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, Sen. David Little, R-Emmett, thus become co-chairmen and alternate at presiding.

Based on political alignment, there are seven Republicans and only three Democrats in the Senate and eight Republicans and only two Democrats in the House on this committee. Because the Democrats gained two seats in the Senate and five in the House, their membership likely will increase two or three in the coming session.

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There will be seven vacancies to fill on this committee in the first regular session of the 47th Legislature to reorganize Dec. 2-4 and then convene for its general session Jan. 10.

Missing the coming two years are the leaders of two opposing factions — State Sens. Mike P. Mitchell, D-Lewiston, a champion for the state government and the underprivileged, and Dean Van Engelen, R-Burley, a leader of the so-called "dirty dozen" which wielded a heavy

knife for the sake primarily of cutting the governor's recommendations.

Both became victims of 1982 elections in their quest for higher office. Van Engelen was defeated in the Republican primary by Nolan Young for state auditor and Mitchell was beaten in the general by Republican Attorney General David H. Leroy for lieutenant governor.

Also not returning are Sen. Kenneth Bradshaw, R-Wendell; and Reps. Dan Emery, R-Boise; Emery E. Hedlund, D-St. Maries, and Marion Davidson, R-Bonners Ferry, who did not seek re-election; and Rep. William F. Lytle, R-Pinehurst, who was defeated in the general election by Democrat Dorothy McCann, a former legislator.

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The eastern Idaho delegation will have a powerful voice on this committee. They include Sens. Israel Merrill, D-Blackfoot; Dane Watkins, R-Idaho Falls; Mark G. Ricks, R-Rexburg; and Vearl Crystal, R-Rigby; and Rep. Ray E. Infanger, R-Salmon.

The committee has come under constant criticism for what many feel is its arrogance and intent to cut state government to a point of ineffectiveness.

Previously to last year, a faction of 12 conservative Republicans, including the five Republicans from eastern Idaho, banded together to slash appropriations below the governor's recommendation for what appeared political purposes.

Last year, however this committee did a face-about so that most legislators and other political observers agreed they turned in an excellent performance.

They didn't finish until late in the session but they had what they called work sheets of each state agency, listing their financial data. They also called in the director or financial analyst of each state department to discuss in detail in subcommittees the technical, financial aspects. This gave state agency personnel the satisfaction of personal input and left a congenial taste for all concerned.

As a result, all of the agency budgets were approved by the full Legislature without hardly a complaint or protest, including the big ones of education and health and welfare.