Legislative limelights

JFAC evenly split on policies

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The all-important Joint Finance-Appropriation Committee which for years was controlled by the Republican conservatives is now evenly split as result of Democratic gains in the 1982 election.

For the last dozen years the Republican conservatives have rammed through drastic state government funding cuts under the administrations of Democratic governors. This was done often to embarrass, first Gov. Cecil D. Andrus and most recently Gov. John V. Evans.

The even split means a 10-10 tie vote on funding which may carry partisan overtones. It requires compromises to break deadlocks, giving the seven Democrats and three moderate Republicans a powerful advantage that they haven't enjoyed in at least 10 years.

It means motions for supplemental appropriations may fail but also motions for cuts also will be defeated, bringing a Mexican standoff.

Because of the state's floundering economy, however, the committee may be snarling over the bones.

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The Democrats, by increasing their membership by five seats in the House and two in the Senate, gain two positions on JFAC. This places their membership at seven instead of five, compared with 13 Republicans. However, the Democrats are joined by three Republican moderates to give them an even break. Most years, the 12 Republican conservatives held the upper hand on philosophical funding cuts against the five Democrats and three Republican moderates, thus earning the dubious title, "dirty dozen."

JFAC is made up by 10 members each of the House Appropriation Committee and the Senate Finance Committee.

The moderate Republicans who often join the Democrats on philosophical but not necessarily partisan votes are Reps. Kitty Gurnsey, Boise, committee co-chairman; Tom Boyd, Genesee, and Lawrence Knigge, Filer.

There are five eastern Idahoans on the committee, Sens. Israel Merrill, D-Blackfoot, and four Repubublicans, Sens. Dane Watkins, Idaho Falls; Mark G. Ricks, Rexburg, and Vearl Crystal, Rigby, and Rep. Ray E. Infanger, Salmon.

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JFAC performed admirably last year as the revenue shrank and department administrators and financial analysts were called in its subcommittees to list financial data on so-called blue sheets. This promoted a cordial relation because it gave the department executives a voice in the budget-setting process, something which has been woefully lacking in the past.

The system worked so well that when the budgets were considered by the full Senate and House there was hardly any protest, merely some questions. This was a situation in sharp contrast with recent sessions.

JFAC has been holding hearings on 1983 fisal year state budget requests but will complete them Wednesday. These are routine matters that have evoked little controversy and most votes on approval have been unanimous or nearly so. The committee will then consider the supplemental budgets, and these might spark some controversies and split votes. After that, the same procedure will be followed for the fiscal 1984 budget.

The state government shortfalls for both fiscal 1983 and fiscal 1984 amounting to something like $70 million each gives little room for bickering over any surpluses as was the case in recent sessions, 1982 excepted. As such, the conservative Republicans will likely have their way in cutting budgets to the bone — and unfortunately, the heart — in many cases.

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