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Legislative limelights . . .

East Idaho legislators' views are influential

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The staunch conservative views of the 18 east Idaho legislators expressed in responses to recent Post-Register questionnaires likely will be closely followed.

This has been the case in past recent sessions and there is no reason to believe it won't be the same for the current session.

The east Idaho legislative delegation lacks many members on the legislative leadership but it does control many of the influential committees by virtue of chairmanships and also has a powerful voice in the most potent committee — the Joint Finance Appropriation Committee — which approves the state budgets.

Only Rep. Melvin Hammond, D-Rexburg, is a member of the leadership as the House minority leader but considering there are only 14 Democrats to 56 Republicans in the House his influence it necessarily limited.

Another leader, Assistant House Majority Leader Darwin Young, R-Blackfoot, resigned to take his place with the State Tax Commission last week. D. Cornell Thomas, a diet center businessman from Pingree, was named to replace Young.

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The east Idaho delegation's greatest strength is holding chairmanships of four of the nine Senate standing committees and in three of the 13 House committees, or in seven of the 22 committees. There are also five members on the 20-member JFAC.

The chairmen in the Senate are Sens. Vearl Crystal, R-Rigby, Agricultural Affairs; Mark G. Ricks, R-Rexburg, Commerce and Labor; Dane Watkins, R-Idaho Falls, Local Government and Taxation; and J. Marsden Williams, Resources and Environment.

Chairman in the House are Reps. Kurt L. Johnson, R-Idaho Falls, Education; Elaine Kearnes, R-Idaho Falls, Health and Welfare;

and John O. Sessions, R-Driggs, Transportation and Defense.

Crystal, Ricks, Watkins and Sen. Israel Merrill, D-Blackfoot, and Rep. Ray E. Infanger, R-Salmon, are members of the JFAC.

As committee chairmen and JFAC members they are highly influential in helping to pass or defeat laws.

The delegation has only two Democrats—Hammond and Merrill—but both are highly effective in the legislative process. This compares with 16 Republicans. The proportionate is below the lineup of 23 Republicans and 12 Democrats in the Senate and 56 Republicans and 14 Democrats in the House, or total of 79 Republicans and only 26 Democrats.

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Votings records show Hammond, Merrill and Mrs. Kearnes generally of more moderate and progressive leanings, while Reps. Sessions, Reps. Linden B. Bateman, R-Idaho Falls, and Rich Orme, R-St. Anthony, occasionally takes flexible stance but all the others are considered rigid conservatives. Yet, when compared with the Legislature as a whole, they are all generally classed conservatives which is the dominant theme among the lawmakers, except for a few Republicans in the Boise area and in north Idaho, most of them Democrats.

The 18 east Idaho legislators represent nearly a fifth of the 105 members of the body and how they vote generally is what is enacted. Their views generally harmonize with those of most their colleagues with the exception of north Idaho Democrats and a few Boise Republicans.

Perhaps the trend may change for more liberal actions in the future as the economy improves and there is a demand for progressive legislation but it's a leadpipe cinch it won't happen in this session. The Legislature has stayed dead center for the last four sessions and it shows no signs of moving any direction, except maybe backwards.