

Legislative limelights

JFAC funding actions awaited with curiosity

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It will be interesting to see how the powerful Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee acts in the coming two weeks on the financially-strapped budget for 1984.

Its future actions will drastically change from the past few years when the so-called "dirty dozen" made up of Republican conservatives rammed through budgetary cuts over the opposition of five Democrats and three moderate Republicans.

In vote after vote on supplemental appropriations there was usually a margin of 12-8 and sometimes 11-9 for cutting many state agency appropriations, much of the time politically motivated and aimed against the two Democratic governors, first Cecil D. Andrus and now John V. Evans.

The situation is changed this year with Democratic gains of two in the Senate and five in the House which gives them an increase of two seats on JFAC. This places the Democratic membership at seven instead of five. They are generally joined by three moderate Republicans, evenly splitting the panel.

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

The three Republican moderates 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. Dane Watkins, Idaho Falls; Mark G. Ricks Rexburg, and Vearl Crystal, Rigby, and Rep. Ray E. Infanger, Salmon, all Republicans who vote the rigid conservative line; and Sen. Israel Merrill, D-Blackfoot.

House Speaker Tom T. Stivers, Twin Falls, has brought Mrs. Gurnsey into his office to make certain she knows she has to

balance the budget. In the past, Mrs. Gurnsey has resented the conservative dominance running roughshod over the more moderate members. She is now in a key position to reverse the results.

Mrs. Gurnsey said she and Stivers reached an understanding that she could be replaced as co-chairman if she could not balance the budget. Mrs. Gurnsey said she agrees she works for the speaker and she will vote to keep the budget in line, even though she hopes the Legislature finds more revenue to plug into the budget.

Stivers also has talked to Knigge about budget-balancing duties but Boyd who is not exactly in the Stivers camp has been left alone.

Stivers has now set a budget goal of \$413 million but the three moderates have all said they believe the Legislature should set a budget of some \$440 million. They hold the key votes because if they joined with the seven Democrats and voted together they could block budget-setting motions from being passed in the committee. On the other hand, they also could not pass increased appropriations on a tie vote. Obviously in view of a standoff this calls for compromises.

All three said they would not vote to bust the budget but they don't believe the \$413 million is realistic, either.

In a key vote last week, the conservatives voted for a \$195 million public school education fund rather than the \$215 million requested, which was the same for 1983. In this vote, Mrs. Gurnsey joined with the solid bloc of seven Democrats but Boyd and Knigge sided with their Republican colleagues and the funding passed 12-8.

JFAC has been hearing all the departmental requests and will soon be voting on supplemental appropriations where the philosophical schisms take place. JFAC hopes to wind up its budget hearings within the next two weeks but the next few days on the voting pattern will be indeed interesting to watch.