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The political pulse

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The national scene. . . .

Sunset hikes state function

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Twenty-three of 35 states with Sunset legislation reported increased government efficiency and public accountability as benefits resulting from that law, Common Cause reported Wednesday.

The report was contained in a 151-page survey, "The Status of Sunset in States: A Common Cause Report."

The Common Cause survey also found that 15 of the states have broadened the scope of their original Sunset laws, frequently to include non-regulatory agencies in the review process.

Idaho is one of 15 states without a Sunset Law. A bill providing for such provisions was last defeated in the Senate 21-14 in the 1977 session. It was sponsored by Sen. Dane Watkins, R-Idaho Falls. The term "Sunset" is derived for terminating programs after a periodic of some three or four years unless they can be proved they deserve to continue.

Watkins amended his original bill to eliminate the self-governing agencies but this proved disastrous as several senators argued there was no need for the bill unless it covered the numerous agencies and boards which are self funded.

The arguments in the Idaho Legislature against the measure was to the effect the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee performs similar review functions.

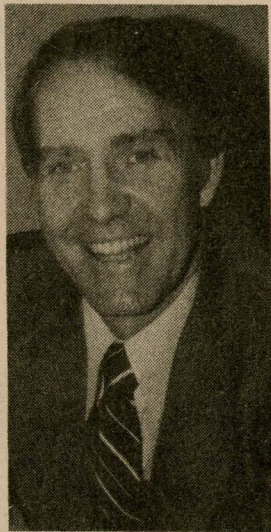
The movement against this law was then led by Lt. Gov. Phil Batt, who was then the Senate majority leader. The Common Cause survey also found that 15 of the states have broadened the scope of their original Sunset laws, frequently to include non-regulatory agencies in the review process.

"This survey of state officials show that Sunset is achieving its goal of helping to make government work better," said Common Cause President Fred Wertheimer. "It also shows that Sunset has been changing the tradition of state Legislatures ignoring oversight responsibilities. One of the important benefits of Sunset has been that hundreds of legislators have gained valuable oversight experience."

Wertheimer also said that "states have run into some implementation problems," adding "most states are working to improve the Sunset process rather than abandon Sunset and its goals."

Sunset legislation provides for the periodic review of state agencies under the threat of automatic termination unless affirmatively recreated by law.

Since 1976, a total of 1,500 agencies have been reviewed under the Sunset process. Fifteen agencies were reviewed in 1976 and by 1981, the number of agencies reviewed had increased to 500.



State Sen. Dane Watkins

Almost one in every five agencies was terminated, one in three modified and less than half recreated with little or no change, said Wertheimer.

Almost half the states indicated a requirement for public membership on boards and commissions as an across-the-board reform that results from Sunset. Requirements for improved administrative practices and disciplinary procedures were additional reforms resulting from Sunset were cited by 40 percent of the states.

According to the Common Cause survey, the 35 states have adopted Sunset laws of varying scope; 10 states review regulatory agencies only, 15 review regulatory and other selected agencies, and 10 states undertake comprehensive reviews of all state agencies.