The Post-Register
The political pulse

Legislative limelights

School consolidation difficult to achieve

By BEN J. PLASTINO
Post-Register political editor

Much ado has been made on the need to consolidate schools on both the higher education and public system level but the records show the movement has been going the opposite direction.

Year after year, many legislators talk how the present 115 school districts should be trimmed to a third that number but little has been done to bring this about. It can be predicted safely that nothing will be done in the coming session, despite the dire financial picture.

On the higher education level, a number of legislators feel that including Boise State University in the system some dozen years ago was a mistake because the state can't support three major universities. Yet, they all admit it is too late now to do anything about it and perhaps Idaho's increasing population and tax base will eventually be capable to handling the problem.

* * *

Newcomers may not know and many oldtimers may have forgotten but in 1947 the entire state underwent the traumatic experience of consolidation. School districts in the state were reduced in 1948-50 from more than 1,300 to 117, and since then, two were abolished to bring the number to the present 115.

Bonneville County had 32 school districts, the bulk housed in what are now the nostalgic abandoned little red school house. These were reduced to the present three, Idaho Falls 91, Bonneville 93 and Swan Valley 92.

During this time, a proposal was submitted for consolidating 91 and 93 but the 93 voters defeated it by a 2-1 margin, mainly because it didn't want to lose what the majority of patrons felt was local control. However, the texture of 93 is gradually changing from dominating rural to suburban, and many sections of the city are now part of District 93.

At that time of consolidation there was some threats of violence because many of the rural people didn't want to lose their school which was the community center. In a few cases, there were some firearms brandished, tempers ran hot and angry words were exchanged during the many stormy local hearings.

* * *

Rather then advancing toward consolidation, the movement has been the reverse. Ririe District split from Jefferson District 251 a dozen years ago and the Terreton area patrons are now progressing towards a similar division from Jefferson.

Efforts to consolidate Sugar City with Madison and in some other sections of the state have failed.

Most legislators take the view that if there is any consolidation it should spring from the local level.

The Idaho Department of Education has long had a proposal for consolidation, including one in 1969 drafted by Allen P. Jeffries, acting director of school consolidation but now retired.

His proposal provided for cutting the present schools district to between 45 and 50. It didn't attract much interest and support. It is still wrapped up in mothballs.

That proposal called for consolidation of Districts 91, 93 and 92, besides Shelley 60 and Ririe 252 into a new district known as 90.

Among the most flagrant existing monstrosities are 11 school districts in Canyon County, many of which cross other district lines to haul their students to school.

In east Idabo, the worst offender is in Bingham with five districts — Blackfoot, Shelley, Firth, Snake River and Aberdeen. None has shown the slightest interest for merger.

If consolidation is to be made it must be come from a mandatory state law, such as existed in 1947. There would have to be a drastic change in views to bring this about but maybe the increasing financial pinch may do just that. There is certainly financial merit to consolidate more school districts in the state.