

# Politics

C-6 The Post-Register, Idaho Falls, Wednesday, April 20, 1984

## Legislative limelights

# Legislature did well against odds

By BEN J. PLASTINO

Post-Register political editor

Idaho's 47th Legislature, the longest in history at 95 days, did remarkably well considering its frightful financial problems.

In view of the mood of most legislators, including most Democrats, Gov. John V. Evans' decision to call a special session is not only ill-advised but is an exercise in futility.

In a single voice, eastern Idaho legislators and Senate President Pro Tem Jim Risch vow they will not appropriate more than the \$451.6 million state general fund budget approved last Thursday evening.

A letter signed by all 24 Republican state senators and 48 of 51 Republican state representatives and presented to the governor said they would not enact further tax increases. The only three who didn't sign were State Reps. Martin Trillhaase, Idaho Falls, who left a day early; Dan Kelly, Mountain Home, a liberal who said funding was too low; and Gene Winchester, Kuna, a conservative, who said the budget was too high.

Evans apparently is depending on the people back home telling legislators they want more funding for education, particularly public schools, but this support may not be forthcoming.

The governor will need to show additional money can be found without further raising an already broad-based tax. At this time, such a possibility is remote.

Perhaps if legislators had slapped on a 2 percent sales tax increase right at the start, they could have had ample money without scratching for revenue from other sources, and even may have had a little cushion.

\*\*\*  
This Legislature reluctantly approved about \$140 million in new taxes, dominated by the \$87 million to be raised by a 1.5 percent sales tax increase. Other large revenue-raising measures included \$12 million in unemployment compensation, \$11 million from compliance with the Internal Revenue Service Code and \$12 million in loss carrybacks.

The \$140 million, for example, is more than the \$133 million allocated for state's 1971 budget. The \$451.6 million was about \$14 million less than fiscal 1983's appropriation, the first time a state budget had been reduced from the previous year.

The Legislative Council reports a three-day minimum special session would cost over \$50,000, figuring legislators' travel expenses, salaries, cost of a skeleton crew of secretarial help, attaches, clerks, and necessary equipment. This is not to mention calling back the already weary legislators after the record-breaking session, which far surpassed the 1967 mark of 89 days.

Legislative Auditor John Balderson said the two-week 1981 special sessions cost \$120,000 — about \$10,000 a day or more.

\*\*\*  
Evans' major reasons for calling a special session are his objections to the \$215 million public school

budget and the \$70 million higher education appropriation. He insists a minimum of \$223 million and \$72 million, respectively, is needed.

It would appear there isn't that great a difference, although the governor said he might add other appropriation proposals and also legislation on the state Supreme Court decision on the Swan Falls issue, in which Idaho Power Co. was awarded superior water rights.

Many legislators say there is no great rush for action on many water rights proposals, and that the issue might be settled through negotiation. They say the matter could be considered at the next regular session in January. Legislative leaders have suggested an interim study committee be formed to make recommendations in the 1984.

\*\*\*

Aside from the all-dominant financial picture, most legislators name toughening the state's drunken driving penalties, including harsher penalties for juvenile drivers; and imposing a 2-cent gas tax increase to help maintain Idaho's highways as the most noteworthy legislation.

There were a number of other bills, such as one requiring relatives to help pay for Medicare and Medicaid costs; one that updated the consumer code; modernization of the Bureau of Vital Statistics; the Anti-Harassment Act which was aimed at radical religious and racial groups; revamping the Juvenile Code; changes in the unemployment compensation law to keep it solvent; and a new indigent medical care bill counties hope will be workable.

Legislators took major action by reaching an agreement with national banks to repay about \$23.5 million rebate in property taxes over three years, as decreed by the Supreme Court.

In view of the \$70 million shortfall for fiscal 1983, ending June 30, and a similar fiscal 1984, beginning July 1, next year's Legislature will face a financial situation that is just as tough unless the economy shows a sudden upturn. Economists say they don't see substantial improvement in Idaho, where basic industries of agriculture, mining and lumbering are the worst hit.

This is the worst financial situation Idaho has faced since it became a state in 1890. During the Depression in the early 30s, state funding of public schools at more than 70 percent and programs of welfare, social services, social security, unemployment compensations and human services were unheard of. If you didn't save enough money for your old age, it was just too bad.

This Legislature was unique in many ways. Besides the 95-day record, it was also the first time in at least a score of years to have such an enormous shortfall, and also nearly a third of the lawmakers were first termers. For most of the past decade, Idaho Legislatures have had the luxury of figuring how to split surpluses, some of them of hefty amounts. Ah, for the good old days.