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Legislative limelights . . .

JFAC is drawing ire of many legislators

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BOISE — How the Joint Finance Appropriations Committee performs henceforth will largely determine the effectiveness of the Idaho Legislature and set the mood for the coming election campaign.

This committee roused the ire of many legislators, especially Democrats, last week when it arbitrarily suspended its committee sessions and set up subcommittees to meet with analysts and other technicians of the various state departments. This was to get detailed information on personnel numbers and figures. It was their aim to determine whether departmental requests were justified in the various sectors of support productivity, said JFAC and legislative leaders.

In doing so, however, it meant a week's delay in the JFAC approving appropriations for the 22 state departments.

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The situation prompted House Minority Leader Melvin Hammond, D-Rexburg, to deliver a scathing attack on the House floor last week for its failure to expedite the budget.

His remarks were later commended by many legislators, including prominent Republicans, who have long been less than happy at what they feel is the arrogant manner this committee has been functioning. This is not only the case this year, but in the last half dozen years.

Hammond, one of the most widely respected legislators at the State Capitol, said JFAC started one week ahead of the Legislature so that it could finish its task early and perhaps let the Legislature to adjourn in the statutory 60 days, or at least Saturday of the second week, or 62 days, March 13.

So far, JFAC has only approved supplemental appropriations and didn't get around to considering the state agency regular funding until Tuesday, or the 42nd day of the session. Under state law, this committee is suppose to finish its



Rep. Melvin Hammond

work on the 45th day, which is Thursday. It hasn't done this in most of the past 20 years, and, of course, won't do it this year.

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Hammond charged there was a breakdown in the committee process which is "damaging to the Legislature." He also alleged JFAC is now going into setting policies, such as saying that the Boise public TV station should be the central sending station, with the Pocatello and Moscow, as the satellites. He added JFAC should confine itself to approving the amount, not specifying how the system should operated.

A more serious charge from Hammond was the fact JFAC has ignored revenue requests from both Gov. John V. Evans, which was expected, and the Legislature's own Revenue Projection Committee.

The committee, led by leading budget cutter, Sen. Dean Van Engelen, R-Burley, scales the revenue to as low as \$458 million. This compares with the governor's revenue recommendations of \$467.2 million and that of the Revenue Projection Committee of \$463.4 million for fiscal 1983.

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This has revived the talk of slashing the JFAC powers but nothing has overcome out of that. Rep. Patty McDermott, D-Pocatello, has submitted three bills intended to cut the committee powers but they are presently languishing in committee. One would cut the committee to 18 members—12 from the House and six from the Senate; another would separate the joint committee and have them operate in the same way as other committees; and a third would name the legislative auditor to assign financial bills to germaine committees.

Hammond particularly criticized JFAC's action in refusing to fund the governor's contingency fund and the Commission of Blind for what he charged was purely political reasons.

Rep. Mack Neibaur, R-Paul, JFAC vice chairman, angrily accused Hammond of delivering remarks that came from the govenor's office and contended there is enough money for the blind.

From this east Idaho view and after watching the antics of JFAC in recent years, it would appear the Legislature should restore its authority by restricting its power and insisting the committee confine its activities to approving appropriations, not setting policies.