Politics

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Legislative limelights

1983 Legislature labeled unique

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Whatever happens the remainder of this session, the 47th Idaho Legislature will go down as perhaps the most unique in many years.

Not only will it hang up the second longest record in history — and maybe the longest — but it also will be noted for enacting some noteworthy legislature despite its frightful financial problems.

It is now in its 87th day and threatens to eclipse the record of 89 days established in 1967. It will do this if it spills to Saturday.

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This is the first time in as long as can be remembered and perhaps in Idaho's 93 years of statehood that the Legislature has had to cope with such large deficits.

This is in vivid contrast with most recent years when the Legislature has had the luxury of surpluses, some of them comparatively large amounts. In fact, 1982 was the first year the Legislature did not have some kind of surplus in most of the past decade.

It's a shock for the veterans who unanimously say this is by far the most difficult session they have attended.

Not even in the Depression days of the 1930s was the situation as bad. That's because the state did not furnish the expansive social, welfare and human services of today. There was no problem — there simply weren't any such programs as the people know them today.

Furthermore the state gave little help to public schools, compared with present.

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Yet with all of its financial headaches the Legislature has been able to come up with some noteworthy legislation and more may be enacted before it grinds to a halt, hopefully by the end of the week.

Both chambers passed by unanimous vote what is called by some the toughest drunken driving law in the nation.

Other bills, which have received little attention because of lack of emotionalism but which are of paramount importance, are those modernizing the Vital Statistics Bureau, deregulating most interest rates in the state, a 48-page bill that recodifies the Consumer Credit Law, the Anti-Harassment Act aimed against radical racial and religous groups, revamping of the Juvenile Code; and the repeal of a law that sends imprisons those guilty of minor infractions, such as in the famed Christopher Peterman youth case at Boise. Other bills include the law making utility power rights subordinate to irrigation rights; the change in the unemployment compensation law to better cope with the financial shortfall; a 2-cent highway tax to keep Idaho's highway from deteriorating; and a measure that revamps the unemployment compensation program to keep it solvent.

Among keen disappointments were the failure of the Legislature to implement the Idaho Energy Plan, to put teeth in the open meeting law; the lack of a workable indigent medical care bill for counties; more home rule for cities and counties; and a number of other bills that may not be enacted.

It still needs compromises to settle its budget and it will do this at a figure higher than the $440 million the Republican legislative leadership approved and lower than the $474 million the governor recommended.