

# Legislators' pay hike relatively small

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Perhaps two north Idaho state senators are more courageous and honest than their fellow legislators, but figures indicate they are justified in strongly supporting increased legislative salaries and expenses.

The two most vocal are State Sens. Vernon T. Lannen, Pinehurst, and Ron J. Beitelspacher, Grangeville, both Democrats. Each hold wage-earning jobs. Beitelspacher as a telephone linesman and Lannen as a logger.

The two actually represent the vast majority of the Idaho taxpayers who are wage earners, two of the few legislators who do. Most Idaho legislators are farmers, retired, or are affiliated in the business sector.

Under new recommendations from the Citizens Committee on Legislative Compensation chaired by Ray W. Rigby, a Rexburg attorney, lawmakers will get about \$84 per day in pay and expenses.

The compensation scale went into effect in December. Unless the Legislature acts by the 45th day of a ses-



Ray W. Rigby

sion, the new scale will remain in effect for at least the next two years. The 45th day for this session falls on Feb. 15.

The Legislature can only repeal or reduce the committee's report, not increase it.

Since 1979, lawmakers have averaged \$7,280 per year, \$4,200 in salary and \$4,080 in expenses. The new scales call for \$4,165 in salary and \$4,200 in expenses. In other words, the increase is mainly in expenses, not salaries, and the figures are based on a 70-day session. If the session goes longer, they would be paid more.

At least two lawmakers have spoken out against the proposed hikes. They are Reps. Vard Chatburn, R-Albion, dean of the Legislature in his 29th year, a rancher; and Kathleen Gurnsey, R-Boise, housewife, co-chairman of the Joint Finance-Appropriation Committee.

Chatburn thinks the expense hikes should be cut in half. Mrs. Gurnsey says she feels that when legislators are asking everybody to hold the line, they should do the same.

The House already has voted to give the Legislature an extra \$500,000 per year for operating expenses, an increase from \$1.8 million to \$2.3 million.

House Majority Leader Jack Kennevick, R-Boise, explained most of

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the extra money is needed because the Legislature was expanded by 21 members, 14 in the House and 7 in the Senate, as a result of legislative reapportionment.

Rigby voted a conservative line when he served as a Democratic state senator some dozen years ago.

"It is the intent that members be compensated for the days of session that they actually serve, and that they not be penalized simply because the session goes longer than 70 days," said a letter signed by Rigby.

The recommendations call for a salary of \$35 per day during the session and \$7 daily when not in session, with \$60 daily for expenses for legislators who maintain a second home in Boise. For those not maintaining a second home — mostly those from the Boise area — the pay would be \$35 daily, plus \$25 for travel expenses.

The old pay scale was a flat \$800 per month for January, February and March when the Legislature is in session, and \$200 monthly the rest of the year.

Legislative pay and expenses have been a source of controversy the last 15 years. In 1971, two Idaho Falls Republicans, Sen. W. Fisher Ellsworth and Rep. Aden Hyde were recalled because of voting for a pay increase.

Yet, 76 of the 105 legislators voted for the hike and no recall action was taken against the 74 others. There were, however, some threats against two or three others.

The recall vote was unfair because it was held in early August. That led to a light turnout of less than half of the eligible voters. The fanatical opponents came out in full force and the two were recalled by about a 200-vote margin each.

Idaho legislators in 1982 were paid the seventh lowest in the nation and it might be even lower now. Only New Hampshire, North Dakota, New Mexico, Utah, South Carolina and Wyoming paid lower.

For example, of the 44 counties in Idaho, 40 pay their county commissioners more than the legislators.

There's a joke around the statehouse that the legislators are paid what they are worth. There are times when it would appear there is some truth in the saying.

The increased costs actually are comparatively small, amounting to about \$1,200 per year more for each legislator. This would be an additional total of less than \$150,000 more per year. That's almost insignificant when compared with the overall state budget of more than a billion dollars, including a half billion in the general operating fund.