

The 1981 Idaho Legislature ...
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State employees may get slight salary increases

(This is the eighth of a series of 16 articles giving the views of East Idaho legislators and the leadership on the salient issues shaping up for the coming session. This is on state employee salary increases.)

BY BEN J. PLASTINO
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Most legislators responding to a Post-Register questionnaire are in favor of salary increases for state public employees, although this will hinge on the money available.

Sen. Mark G. Ricks, R-Rexburg, member of the Joint Finance Appropriation Committee, which has the key voice in determining this, reflects the views of most of the lawmakers by saying he feels state salaries should be in line with the private sector.

"We cannot expect the taxing public to support state employee salaries at a higher rate than they receive for like employment," said Ricks.

Another member of the committee, Sen. Israel Merrill, D-Blackfoot, said "Maybe this is the year for across-the-board dollar increase for everyone, rather than percentage increases."

Most of the leadership is less generous, such as Senate President Pro Tem Reed Budge, R-Soda Springs, who favors no state increase, or maybe very little, depending on the revenue available.

House Speaker Ralph Olmstead, R-Twin Falls, said he "believes in Idaho continuing to be a prevailing rate payer"; and even Majority Leader Walter E. Little, R-New Plymouth, who has registered opposition to most state programs, relents enough to say "to a limited degree under the funds available."

Senate Majority Leader Walter E. Little, R-New Plymouth, agrees a cost-of-living increase will be necessary.

House Majority Leader Melvin Hammond, D-Rexburg, said he hoped an 8 percent increase can be granted.

Rep. Wayne E. Tibbitts, R-Lorenzo, said "I think we should all hold the line on these increases, including Legislature, state, county and public elected officials."

Most of the legislators agree there should be some increase, at least, cost-of-living, but dislike setting a percentage until they see the anticipated revenue.

Rep. Martin Trillhaase, R-Idaho Falls, takes a different approach, saying high-salaried administrators, the governor and legislators should set the example this year by not taking increases.

Sen. William Floyd, R-Idaho Falls, said he favored merit raises where practical.

Not so optimistic was Rep. Gary L. Paxman, R-Idaho Falls, who said "I feel increases are going to be hard to come by."

Rep. Linden B. Bateman, R-Idaho Falls, said he favors a modest cost of living increase for public employees but no hikes for legislators.

Rep. John O. Sessions, R-Driggs, is more specific, naming 9.5 percent increase in salaries, adding "I do support giving them a modest cost-of-living increase. However, until such time as the new revenue projection is determined it will not be possible to determine just how much an increase can be given."

Legislative limelights...

Eastern Idaho legislators represent mainstream views

BY BEN J. PLASTINO
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Eastern Idaho legislators in recent years generally have been known and often chided as being ultra-conservative and out of step with the mainstream of Idaho politics.

Yet, year after year, it was the conservative views of East Idahoans which have prevailed in the enactment of legislation, generally placing a clamp on new programs and on what many people thought were progressive steps.

The most vocal criticisms came from the more liberal lawmakers from the Boise area and North Idaho, both Republicans and Democrats.

East Idahoans, for the most part, took the kidding in good nature, but it didn't change their voting patterns — not by a long shot.

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The last election showed, however, it was East Idahoans, not their more liberal compatriots, who were more correct in following a rigid conservative line.

The two most liberal legislators in East Idaho — and by state standards they were considered conservative — were swept aside by the dominating far right tide. They were Sen. Richard A. Egbert, D-Tetonia, dean of the Legislature with nearly 30 years of state service, and Rep. Wendell Miller, D-Idaho Falls.

It's rather ironic that Egbert would be viewed in this light, since most of the Idaho Democratic senators were often irked at Egbert for voting against many bills generally supported by his party colleagues and often voting with the Republican majority.

The same goes for Miller, who as a former union member, was considered somewhat of a moderate, yet compared with the House members as a whole, would certainly be classified as a conservative.

Yet their Democratic label and the suspicion they weren't hard conservatives apparently ousted them from office.

Another legislator considered somewhat a liberal, Sen. Israel Merrill, D-Blackfoot, escaped the Democratic debacle by nearly 1,000 votes, but mostly because he is highly popular personally and his opponent, Dean Jones, was considered a rather controversial Blackfoot businessman. Merrill was the only Democrat to win a

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contested legislative race in East Idaho.

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Other East Idaho liberal legislators also have been ousted in previous years at a time when incumbents were generally re-elected, no matter what their performances. Two years ago, it was State Sen. Dick Smith, R-Rexburg, considered one of the most outstanding lawmakers in the Legislature and who established the state financial educational formula system which functioned for many years. Also sent to the sidelines in 1972 because of her liberalism was Rep. Helen McKinney, R-Salmon.

These two legislators have been the only East Idaho incumbents beaten for re-election in the last dozen years.

In 1971, two of the more knowledgeable legislators, Sen. Fisher Ellsworth and Aden Hyde, Idaho Falls Republicans, were recalled merely because they voted for a pay raise. Yet, they were only two of the 76 in the 105-member body who did this. It's one of the blackest marks in Bonneville County's turbulent political history.

Aside from Merrill, the only surviving Democrat in East Idaho is Rep. Melvin Hammond, Rexburg, who prides himself on following a conservative voting pattern but yet is more moderate than most lawmakers. He was unopposed in the last election.

Perhaps this conservative mania is one reason that Hammond was elected the House Senate minority leader over the liberal Patricia McDermott, D-Pocatello, but Hammond also is personally popular.

Perhaps the pendulum may begin swinging back to the center but as of now, conservatism in its rawest best is the key to political success in Idaho.