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Legislative limelights . . .

Idaho Legislature faces tough problems

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When the 105 men and women gather in Boise in early January to attend the 2nd regular session of the 46th Idaho Legislature they will find a number of tough problems to solve.

It comes during the general election year when whatever they do will carry a strong political overtone as all who want to return face re-election. From all indications, nearly all will seek re-election, and this likely includes all 18 legislators in the 10 east Idaho counties which embrace six legislative districts.

At least none of the current east Idaho lawmakers have said they won't run, although a couple, Sen. Dane Watkins, R-Idaho Falls, and Rep. Wayne E. Tibbitts, R-Lorenzo, said they are undecided and Sen. Israel Merrill, D-Blackfoot, is looking at a possible 2nd District congressional race, but not too seriously.

The most dominant issue, as usual, is financing but much of the problems will be missing because it will be the tightest budget in years in view of declining revenue from a sluggish economy. This will avoid the annual battles on what to do with the surplus which has been prevalent the last dozen years. Most agree a budget of about \$465 million may be approved, or about a 10 percent hike from the current budget of \$422 million, but this is misleading as the state will need to make up some \$30 million expected to be lost from federal funding, plus the 10 percent inflation factor.

In this connection, the lawmakers must wrestle with possibilities of new taxes, such as severance, and what kind of tax relief they will grant, such as continuance of homestead exemptions and the senior citizen circuit breakers.

It appears from views expressed so far, they will avoid increased sales, income and other major taxes, although a critical financial shortage may force them to look at this possibilities.

There are two emotional issues which are less important but will keep the lawmakers making political hay. They are the Right-to-Work measure which keeps popping up every year, and the final settlement of legislative reapportionment.

The Right to Work proposal easily passed the

House but was crushed in the Senate this year, mostly as result of opposition from Sen. James A. McClure and Idaho Republican Chairman Dennis Olsen who fear such a law could backfire on Republican candidates. It likely will meet the same fate again this year if pushed.

Gov. John V. Evans took bad advice from his legislative Democratic leaders and used poor judgment in vetoing the reapportionment proposal passed in the July special session. About the same kind of plan probably will be approved in the coming session, with possible minor boundary changes in the Pocatello and Boise districts. Democrats complained these districts favored Republicans but this is open to question as the 1982 elections will prove. Wrangling over two legislative district boundaries out of 35 hardly justified a veto.

Funding of education on high, secondary and vocational levels will prove one of the toughest nuts to crack as item accounts for about 70 percent of the general fund budget. Whatever is approved won't be enough as many programs and activities will suffer cuts. What is needed are such drastic reforms as school consolidations, equalizing funding for all school districts, and a different school distribution formula but this won't come about for a few years, if ever.

Many other proposals also must be considered, such as tightening laws for indigent medical care, including the catastrophic funding; funding and remedial laws to prevent cutbacks in highway improvements and State Police operations; judiciary changes and tougher laws for the hardened criminals; more powers for cities, including local option tax powers; comprehensive open meeting law; higher game and fish license fees and expanded recreational; changing the women prison to Orofino; a state energy plan and changes in the water plan; and possible changes in the election laws for easier registration and voting and possible alternations in the party convention system.

These are likely the most prominent issues but possible other will develop as the Legislature gets underway. Whatever they do, will be decided by the voters if they approve performances or lack of them, in the May primary election which comes shortly after the lawmakers adjourn in late March or early April.