The Post-Register
The political pulse

Idaho Falls, Idaho, Wednesday, November 18, 1981 E-3

Legislative limelights . . .

Idaho's legislators 7th lowest paid in U.S. and no raises seen

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There's a familiar and popular saying in the Idaho Statehouse that legislators are paid what they are worth and those in this state are the seventh lowest of the 50 in the nation.

Whether that's true or not, the sensitive Idaho lawmakers have refused to take pay raises of any note since 1971 - because that's when two Idaho Falls legislators, Sen. Fisher Ellsworth and Rep. Aden Hyde, both Republicans, were recalled because they voted for a pay raise.

This is despite the fact that 76 of Idaho 105 legislators also voted for that same salary hike. There were several others who were threatened with recall action but none got to the voting stage.

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The Idaho legislators earn about $4,200 in salary, plus $44 daily in expenses for each day the Legislature is in session (usually about 75 days annually), and get five expense roundtrips to their homes if outside of Boise during the session. That comes out to about $7,200 a year for both salaries and expenses.

Under Idaho law, there is a bipartisan Citizens Committee on Legislative Compensation that can make recommendations for pay increases. These recommended pay hikes automatically go into effect unless rejected by the Legislature by the 25th day of a legislative session and this has been refused by the Legislature the last few years.

The system was sort of a back door approach to get the salary raises because legislators didn't dare risk the wrath of the voters by voting directly on their own salary hikes.

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The only states which pay their lawmakers less than Idaho are New Hampshire, North Dakota, New Mexico, Utah, South Carolina and Wyoming. New Hampshire is the lowest with a mere $300 a year and $3 daily during the session, but no expenses.

Idaho legislators rejected a pay increase recommendation of $915 yearly in the last session as a result of a Senate vote of 33-1 but 20 states voted higher salaries; 12 raised their daily living expenses and 20 upped their travel allowances, according to the 1980-81 Book of the States.

State Sen. James E.Risch, R-Boise, Senate majority leader, led the fighting against the salary raise while Sen. Vernon T. Lannen, D-Pinehurst, was the only one to vote for accepting the increase. He contended wage earners like himself, a Bunker Hill security supervisor, needed the added money to serve in the Legislature.

In most of the larger states, the lawmakers meet almost the year around. Naturally the largest states pay the most, such as Michigan with $31,000 a year, New York $28,788, California $28,788, California $28,110, Illinois $28,000 and Pennsylvania $25,000. Oddly enough, the tiny territory of Guam pays its legislators a handsome $26,000.

These salary increase are in addition to so-called expenses while the lawmakers are in session. For example, it's $50 daily in California, $6,200 a week in Michigan, and $55 daily in New York.

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As 1982 is an election year and because the financing is the tightest in many years, it's a foregone conclusion there will be no consideration of salary or expense increases in the coming session which convenes in Januaruy.

Because of the low salaries, most observers feel the quality of the Legislature has been steadily declining in recent years. It has got to the point that only those who have a slack season in the winter, such as farmers and ranchers, those somewhat retired, or those with some special interests, can afford to serve.

On the other hand, many legislators serve at financial losses, such as attorneys, doctors, school teachers, businessmen and others with fulltime duties. As a result, many have not sought re-election after serving a term or two, such as Dr. Ronald Lechelt and Attorneys Orval Hansen, Eugene L. Bush and Terry Crapo, all of Idaho Falls.

A reasonable salary at least might attract outstanding men and women to serve Their state, although it must be admitted that is not necessarily the case.

Legislative annual costs, including salaries, expenses and operating costs are figured now at about $1.5 million. That's insignificant when compared with an overall state budget of more than $1 billion, including $422 million in the general fund.