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The political pulse

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Legislative limelights...

Special Legislature could tackle finances

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The disclosure by Gov. John V. Evans he probably will call a special session of the Idaho Legislature in July to tackle the tough problem of reapportionment based on the new 1980 census offers an opportunity for supplemental funding for deeply slashed state agencies.

The governor indicated a reluctance to consider financial matters at this session. Yet he is the one who complained of a number of badly underfunded state agencies and at the same time predicted a surplus by the end of the fiscal year increasing from the previous \$15 million to possibly \$20-\$23 million.

The funding should be considered only for those agencies in critical need, such as public education, higher education, a number of human service programs of the Department of Health and Welfare, lack of water quality management, elimination of state air quality control, the Office of Energy, Office of Aging, and Department of Community Services and Economics, for example.

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If the heavy surpluses materialize as the governor maintains, it could work in his favor. He could contend with considerable justification the Republican conservatives eliminated many programs unnecessarily by ignoring his budget recommendations and instead took their own revenue projection figures.

It would serve an ideal public forum to say that he took the optimistic high road by having faith in Idaho's growth while the ultra conservative faction chose the low road.

As such, the governor might ask for additional funding for such popular programs as public television, higher education, programs to help the mentally retarded and disabled, Aid to Dependent Children and more funding for public education to ease local school property taxes.

The governor is wise to lean toward a summer date because it will give him the opportunity to get this supplemental funding. Actually the governor wanted late May or early June for a special

session. Legislative leaders have been talking about a October or November session when supplemental funding would be too late. As it developed, the Legislative Council made up primarily of the leadership suggested at their meeting Friday afternoon July 7 for such a session. It was a compromise the governor said he could accept.

The governor, however, can take unilateral action in easing the 3.85 percent holdback he imposed last summer because of a drop in revenue from what was anticipated. This will help a number of state agencies who can't even pay their rent or execute other normal office activities.

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House Speaker Ralph Olmstead, R-Twin Falls, tabbed as the probable leading Republican gubernatorial contender, is certain to become a target. It was he and Senate President Pro Tem Reed Budge, R-Soda Springs, who instructed the "dirty dozen", or the Republican conservatives of the Joint Finance Appropriation Committee, to keep within the Legislative Revenue Projection Committee's estimated income of \$422 million. In effect, they were told to ignore the governor's recommended budget of \$438 million.

Most of the deep cuts, however, were politically motivated. Led by the abrasive Sen. Dean Van Engelen, R-Burley, the majority on the JFAC took the opportunity to wipe out water and air quality management, strip human services programs, ripped public television, and gave minimum funding to public education and higher education, far below what the governor recommended.

They maintained, with some justification, that voters wanted cuts in state spending but it is obvious the Republican faction took their spite out on programs they didn't like.

In any event and unfortunately, there will be a strong political overture in any financial matters the Legislature may handle in the special session. It could develop until a deadlock that will do neither the governor, Legislature, and most important, the public, any good.