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The political pulse

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Legislative limelights...

No drastic changes seen in revamping

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The possibility that Gov. John V. Evans may call for a special session of the Idaho Legislature in May for reapportionment focuses attention on possible changes in legislative representation.

The governor said he would confer with the legislative leadership to discuss special session plans. Most of the leadership prefers waiting until

October and November, but only the governor is authorized to make the call.

Observers suspect the governor wants a spring session so that the Legislature can make supplemental fundings for those programs he thought were badly shortchanged or had no funds at all.

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The governor and others believe there could be a loss of legislative seats in some rural areas in East Idaho and North Idaho with gains in the Boise area but a cursory survey would indicate this is not the case. The Boise area might get an extra legislative district and there could be some changes in legislative boundaries, but as a whole there should not be a drastic revision from the present setup.

Myran H. Schlechte, director of the Legislative Council, said the 1980 census figures indicate the average legislative population in each of the 35 districts will increase from the present 20,371 to 26,969. Court decisions under the "one vote one people" rule indicate there should be no more than a 5 percent population differential among the districts.

Schlechte also believes there will be no drastic shift in legislative districts. Schlechte said it appears by the legal interpretation that if changes are made by early November that will be time enough. Legislative candidates must have lived in their district at least a year and Schlechte said that is interpreted to mean the November, 1982, election, not the May primary.

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The new census report shows the 1st Congressional District now has 41,441 more people than the 2nd District. The 1st District now has 492,688 and the 2nd District 451,247. The state population is listed at 943,935, up 32.4 percent from the 731,015 in 1970, and the state's growth was the seventh fastest in the nation.

Most legislators believe the congressional districts can be evened by shifting more of the Ada County population from the 1st to the 2nd District, rather than making drastic revisions in other counties.

Minority Leader Ron J. Twilegar, D-Boise, displayed a plan in the last Legislature which proposed listing all of the southern tier of counties extending from Bannock in the east to the Oregon line in the west in the 2nd District, with all others in the 1st District. That would, in effect, place east and central counties with those in the north in the 1st district. That would include all counties from

Bingham County north, embracing Bonneville, Jefferson, Madison and others of the Upper Snake River Valley and Central Idaho.

Even Twilegar acknowledged it wouldn't be acceptable because it would merge the present two congressmen, George V. Hansen and Larry Craig, in the same district. Twilegar said his idea was to avoid splitting Ada County, yet that has advantages in giving the state's largest county a voice in both districts.

Placing more of Ada County in the 2nd district would harm Hansen as he has always run poorly in that county and his margin of victory in recent years has been less than 9 percent.

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East Idaho growth has generally kept pace with the remainder of the state. For example, Bonneville County's population has been at a 25 percent clip, and so has Bannock County. Both are almost even, with Bonneville listed at 65,987, just ahead of Bannock with 65,421. Rexburg and Madison County also has been one of the fastest growing centers.

Schlechte agrees there could be some legislative boundary changes but East Idaho would largely retain the six legislative districts to cover the 10 counties.

Ada County likely will gain another legislative district with one senator and two state senators and these likely will come at the expense of sparsely populated counties.

Kootenai County with Coeur d'Alene as the county seat grew the fastest with 69 percent and its population of 59,770 has now vaulted over Twin Falls and Nezperce counties, ranking behind Ada, Canyon, Bonneville and Bannock.

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In 1971, following the 1970 census, it took an 18-day special session to hammer out compromises for legislative reapportionment.

Many of the legislators still insisted that land areas should be considered but the courts held that people, not farm animals or farm holdings, should be considered in reapportionment.

Despite some charges of "gerrymander", the reapportionment appeared to be drafted fairly. A few minor changes have been made where the population failed to keep within the 5 percent differential, such as shifting Lyman and Archer precincts in Madison County, to District 31, made up of Bonneville and Teton counties.

Aside from a few Democratic pockets, such as Bannock and a few counties in North Idaho, most of Idaho is Republican territory. Any "gerrymandering"-meaning drawing up lines to favor a political party-is unnecessary. In fact, the legislators will be hardpressed to try to equalize legislative district populationwise and still keep county lines intact. The old system of just assigning one senator and two representatives for each county, regardless of population, was simple but hardly fair.