

The political pulse

Legislative limelights...

Lobbyists' influence dominates LegislatureBY BEN J. PLASTINO
Post-Register political editor

Influence of lobbyists, particularly those with vested interests, has always been extensive in the Idaho Legislature. But what was done in the past session deprived the people the opportunity for getting more electric power at comparatively cheap price.

Perhaps the most influential and whose efforts were detrimental to most of the citizens of Idaho was the Idaho Power Co. But there are others, such as the forest, mining and trucking interests, banks and other large corporations.

It raises the legitimate question of who represents the people's interest in the Legislature. Most ordinary citizens can't afford the time and money to lobby for their welfare so it's bulk of the daily newspaper political writers, associations representing cities, counties, school districts, employees and other such groups; AAUW, League of Women Voters and others which have no monetary concern who must fight for the general public interest.

The Greater Idaho Falls Chamber of Commerce, strangely enough, is one of the few which also has gone to bat for the public's interest in most cases, and it has been highly successful.

That is not to say most legislators are not concerned with the public but they are under constant pressure from the big lobbies which lavishly wine and dine them. Most of them are invited to various dinners and social events nearly every night of the week while the Legislature is in session, particularly in the early part. It is bound to have some influence.

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The situation hit close to home this last session because Idaho Falls proposed a bill that would benefit electrical production, not only for Idaho Falls but for the entire state.

The bill would have permitted public power cities, such as Idaho Falls, to float revenue bonds for electric power facilities. This measure was geared primarily to enable Idaho Falls to build a fourth bulb turbine power plant that could have furnished surplus power to the Pacific Northwest during the summer months.

But what happened?

Logan Lanham, Idaho Power Co. vice president, testified briefly at a Senate State Affairs hearing against the measure, saying the committee should proceed with caution in giving cities and counties authority to construct or purchase power-generated facilities by issuing revenue bonds.

Idaho Power has opposed similar proposals in the past, saying cities and water users would be competing with the utility. However, this is not the fact with Idaho Falls which is interested primarily in serving its own city citizens.

The entire Republican leadership opposed the bill, Sen. President Pro Tem Reed Budge, Soda Springs; Majority Leader Jim Risch, Boise; Assistant Majority Leader J. Wilson Steen, Glenns Ferry; and State Affairs Committee Chairman Leon Swenson, Nampa.

Voting to get it out of committee were J. Marsden Williams, R-Idaho Falls; and two Democrat leaders, Minority Leader Ron Twilegar, Boise, and Assistant Minority Leader Kermit Kiebert, Hope.

Sen. Dane Watkins, R-Idaho Falls, sponsor of the measure, was flabbergasted when this measure was suddenly transferred from his Local Government and Taxation Committee to State Affairs. He asserted it likely would have passed in his committee but Budge had transferred it to State Affairs unknown to him.

Watkins said he now will work on a compromise acceptable to Idaho Power in the 1982 session so that it can be placed on the November 1982 ballot as a constitutional amendment. It needs a two-thirds legislative vote to do this.

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By their actions, the two top legislators, Budge and House Speaker Ralph Olmstead, R-Twin Falls, are known in the Legislature as the main champions of Idaho Power and other vested interests.

The Idaho Falls power measure was not the only one torpedoed. Another revenue bond measure sponsored by Sen. John Peavey, D-Carey

that would permit construction of electric facilities by irrigation district also was bottled up in the Senate State Affairs Committee. Still another seeking revenue bond construction for all energy facilities was buried in the Senate Resources and Environment Committee. They didn't even get the benefit of a vote.

Over in the House, a companion bill sponsored by Rep. Patricia McDermott, D-Pocatello, to permit electrical construction for energy facilities also was kept under wraps in committee by Olmstead.

A bill that permitted the city to sell its surplus power did pass the Legislature but it is of little good unless the fourth city turbine is installed. Idaho Power Co. representatives even questioned this measure but didn't openly oppose it, mainly because it followed the newly-passed Pacific Northwest Electric Power Planning and Conservation Act which encourages this type of legislation, said legislators.

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One of the best bills passed by the Idaho Legislature was badly weakened by Idaho Power and Olmstead. This was the measure backed by Reps. Vard Chatburn, R-Albion, chairman, and Rep. Linden B. Bateman, R-Idaho Falls, of the House Resources and Conservation Committee. It permits revenue bonds by water users to rebuild water delivery systems. The bill had a provision to also permit installing energy-generating facilities but Olmstead objected and Chatburn omitted it to get the bill passed.

The strange thing about this is that irrigation interests testified strongly for the bill and resented the power company's and Olmstead's strong-arm methods.

This would indicate that it is such tactics that is losing the power company the backbone of its support—the farmers who are faced with rising power bills and shortage of power. Just last week Idaho power asked for a 21 percent rate increase.

Another chief Idaho Power Co. lobbyist is Greg Painter, who has been around for years to make certain there is no bill passed that is inimical to the power company interests.

Department of Health and Welfare spokesman also charge it was the Idaho Power Co. which was behind the movement to withhold funding for the air quality management bureau so that it would make it easier to build a coal-fired plant.

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There are other little shenanigans that take place in the Idaho Legislature that are not exactly helpful to the bulk of the people.

The powerful bank lobby, for example, was tabbed by legislators behind a bill that permits increasing interest of small loans and credit cards from 18 to 21 percent. A limit of 24 percent was first proposed but the governor, himself a banker, was opposed.

The influential timber and mining interests also were reported by veteran legislators as the main force in not enacting a severance tax on timber and minerals.

Because there has been no oil or gas found, a severance tax on this was imposed which may be one of the best things that ever happened if such resources are discovered and produced in Idaho.

The Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry is the organization which serves as the umbrella for these big interests and doles out generous campaign contributions to those legislators who favor their cause.

Olmstead also kept Gov. John V. Evans' Homestead Exemption Act bottled in committee because it would shift property tax from the little owner to the utilities. This called for an exemption of 15 percent or \$30,000, whichever is less, and it would become automatic. However, the sentiment was strong enough despite Olmstead's opposition to continue the present exemption of 10 percent and not more than \$20,000 but home owners must apply.

These are just a few of the examples which indicate the people's interest often are not best served. Those who are concerned should contact their legislators to advise them they are aware of what is happening and to vote for the interest of the people.