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Legislative limelights...

GOP conservative legislators face test

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The Republican conservatives who had control of the Idaho 1981 Legislature must now stand the credit or fault for what happens in state government during the next year.

It will be a crucial test for House Speaker Ralph Olmstead, R-Twin Falls, who seeks the governor's chair but the fortunes of most other rigid Republican conservatives also hang in the balance.

The past session was important because it will affect state government for the 1982 fiscal year ending June 30, 1982, and much of the campaign will hinge on the legislative performance—or the lack, thereof.

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If the state's economy is still in the doldrums and the revenue settles near the legislative projection of \$422 million, then the Republican majority will look good, indeed. If there is a surplus, of say, \$12 million or more as Gov. John V. Evans and his staff assert, then there could be a backlash to the Republican conservatives.

Most voters will remember vividly what happened the the coming year, although 1982 legislation will have an important bearing.

The key issue will center on state revenue. If it continues tight, the Republican conservatives will contend with justification that they were wise to draft a conservative budget or it would have meant financial disaster. If there is a hefty surplus, the governor will then present the forceful argument that the legislators ripped state government unnecessarily and deprived people of essential service.

Virtually dismantling the Office of Energy, Office of Aging, and Women's Commission, besides eliminating air and water quality management, will be among the most controversial issues.

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One of the highlights was the comparatively warm relations between the Republicans and Democrats in both houses. There were few party-line votes. The election of the two top minority leaders was largely responsible for this, Rep. Melvin Hammond, D-Rexburg, in the House, and Sen. Ron J. Twilegar, D-Boise, in the Senate. These two were better able to work on a professional basis with their Republican counterparts, than did their predecessors, Rep. Patricia McDermott, D-Pocatello, and Sen. Cy Chase, D-St. Maries.

As a result there were few partyline votes, as the lawmakers argued most issues on merits, rather than emotion and partisanship.

In fact, the only partyline division on a major bill took place on legislation implementing

Idaho's participation in the Pacific Northwest Planning and Conservation Council. The Senate leadership's insistence on requiring bipartisan appointment of the two Idaho representatives to the council passed the Senate on a 23-12 partyline vote but it drew opposition from many Republican moderates in the House, passing by only two votes.

The governor vetoed the measure and it was upheld by the Senate Democrats. As a result, a compromise was reached to omit the bipartisan appointment provision but retain Senate confirmation of the two appointments and this passed almost without dissent. Level heads were able to reach the compromise but in past years, the intense partisanship might have precluded this.

Two of the surprises were failure of the Right-to-Work Bill and two measures furthering the Sagebrush Rebellion to hurdle the Senate. The work bill was tabled by switching of five Republicans, including two leaders, to join the Democrats. In the House, the leading Democrat, Minority Leader Melvin Hammon, Rexburg, joined the Republicans, but a dozen moderate Republicans registered opposition.

The two Sagebrush bills languished in a Senate committee on the final day, indicating there was no great enthusiasm on part of the Republican leadership to press for enactment after they easily passed the House.

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Coming under especial fire or plaudits—depending how one looks at it—will be the so-called "dirty dozen" of the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee. They were the ones primarily responsible for the budget cuts that kept the outlay at \$422 million, instead of the \$438 million Evans recommended

Four members of that dozen who voted 12-8 in favor of controversial general fund cuts are from east Idaho. They are Sens. Dane Watkins, R-Idaho Falls; Vearl Crystal, R-Rigby; and Mark G. Ricks, R-Rexburg, and Rep. Ray E. Infanger, R-Salmon. The only other east Idaho legislator on that powerful committee is a Blackfoot Democrat, Sen. Israel Merrill, who opposed the deep slashes.

The election of 1980 was a clear sweep for the Republican conservatives but as any veteran political observer knows the mood changes, just as it did from liberalism of the past two decades. The 1982 elections will furnish an opportunity to see if this is the case. Also complicating the picture is reapportionment brought on by the 1980 census. Some changes in legislative district boundaries could have some bearing. However, these changes in East Idaho are expected to be slight.