

Idaho Legislature highlights, drawbacks scrutinized

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What the 1981 Idaho Legislature did or didn't accomplish will become the juicy political topic leading to the 1982 elections.

Much of what happened in the recent session will vitally affect most citizens for fiscal year 1982, beginning this July 1 and ending June 30, 1982.

The 1982 Legislature, or the second half of the 46th regular session, will enact laws, but they generally will not take effect until July 1, 1982, and the results likely will not be felt until far later in the year for the fall campaign.

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This Legislature is generally viewed as being low profile, but there were a number of high points.

They enacted a tight budget of \$422 million that has evoked screams from nearly all state agencies, particularly public and higher education, state public employees, Department of Health

and Welfare human service programs and air quality administration and the Department of Water Resources water quality management programs.

Most important the Legislature completed implementing the 1 percent bill by removing the 2 percent cap and allowing for a 5 percent increase, and requiring all properties to be appraised at market value.

They approved a three-bill package to raise \$17.8 million in new revenue to finance highway construction, much of it in the Upper Snake River Valley, and \$7.1 million to match some \$46 million in federal funds.

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Most important from the voters' point of view, it avoided raising sales or income taxes, but this means the nasty question will come up again in the politically sensitive election year of 1982.

The Legislature revamped the state's Medicaid program to encourage home care of the elderly by allowing tax deductions for families supporting those of 65 years of age or more at home. It also imposed limits on costs in the Medicaid program and would reward the more efficient nursing homes with incentive payments of up to \$1.50 per patient daily.

The lawmakers did continue the present Homestead Exemption Act of \$10,000 or 20 percent of home valuation, whichever is less, but the homeowner must apply. They, however, rejected a governor's bill for increasing this to \$15,000, or 30 percent, mostly because of House Speaker Ralph Olmstead's opposition.

They passed a 7 percent increase for state employees but appropriated only \$4 million and this could bring a loss of 322 state jobs.

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Much of the petty bickering of past sessions was missing this year, and this helped speed up the legislative process.

Largely because of good relations between the Republicans and Democrats, the Legislature passed a compromise bill allowing Idaho to join the Northwest Electric Power Planning and Conservation Council and omitting a bipartisan reference in the two appointments. Senate confirmation of the appointment of Gov. John V. Evans' former chief administrative assistant, Robert Saxvik; and former governor and U.S. secretary of interior Cecil D. Andrus press secretary, Chris Carlson, could set the stage for a bitter fight in 1982.

They also passed a law allowing Idaho to join the Northwest Radioactive Waste Compact to dispose of its low level radioactive waste at Hanford, Wash.

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In the way of specific but not general tax increases besides the highway 2-cent per gallon and 21 percent vehicle and ton truck mile hikes, were 2 percent severance tax on any oil or natural gas that may be produced in Idaho, and 2 percent room tax to promote tourism and keep the tourism department functioning.

They also allowed a 4-cent per gallon tax break to encourage incentive for gasoline use and production.

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The legislators enacted bills sponsored by Sen. Dane Watkins, R-Idaho Falls, that lessened the burden of inheritance taxes, bringing a savings of about \$3 million and increased exemptions to \$400 for married couples that will harmonize with the U.S. Internal Revenue Service Code.

They voted to impose mandatory prison sentences for second conviction on drug-pushing charges, to permit a vote on a constitutional amendment to eliminate discriminatory language against Mormons, and to permit Idaho taxpayers to donate \$5 from the state income tax for the U.S. Olympic fund.

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Two of the most important measures implemented the Idaho Water Plan, permitting financing by revenue bonds of water projects and for water right holders to change nature of use of their water.

They required Idaho farmers provide sanitary facilities for their field workers, restored citizenship rights of convicted felons upon completion of sentence or probation.

The legislators, surprisingly, provided \$2.5 million to help construct the Morrison Fine Arts Center at Boise State University, and closed legal loopholes that allowed nude dancing.

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What they didn't do was about as important as what was enacted.

They rejected the proposed Right-to-Work Law, failed to act on the Sagebrush Rebellion that would allow Idaho to take title to 12 million acres of BLM land and would change the constitution to obliterate the provision that Idaho give up rights to federal land, defeated attempts to repeal the Land Use Planning Act of 1975, and rejected proposals to wipe out public kindergartens.

They also rejected proposals to eliminate the gifted and talented student program, or change status of Lewis-Clark State College.

The Legislature decided not to sell the state-owned Eagle Island property, rejected proposed legislative salary increase, and unanimously rejected a challenge to the election of Sen. John Peavey, D-Carey.

It also refused to increase the 55-mile speed limit, refused to consider any rules or regulations for shelter homes and care centers, and turned down a \$10,000 state reward fund for apprehension of the killer of two state game and fish officers.

The lawmakers also turned back bills that would change the present primary election date from May to August or September, or require convention delegate endorsement for congressional and state offices. The Idaho Republican Central Committee had asked for the convention endorsement but opposed changing the May primary in the hopes it would give them more time to unseat the Democratic governor.

This is not to mention what they did in gutting many programs in their tight financial budget, such as virtually eliminating the Office of Energy, Office of Aging, Division of Community Affairs, and the Women's Commission. That's the main record the legislators must answer to their constituents.