

The Post-Register

The political pulse

Idaho Falls, Idaho, Wednesday, April 1, 1981

E-7

Legislative limelights...

East Idaho legislators influential in session

BY BEN J. PLASTINO
Post-Register political editor

BOISE — This 46th Idaho Legislature didn't exactly cover itself with glory, but most of the 18 east Idaho legislators from the 10 counties took prominent roles in the proceedings.

As mentioned previously, their staunch conservatives views prevailed and as a result, the budget of \$422 million was approved, far below the \$438 million recommended by Gov. John V. Evans. Most felt their constituents wanted a cut in state government and they generally followed policies along that line.

East Idahoans, for example, hold chairmanships in four of the nine Senate standing committee and in three of the 13 House standing committees.

* * *

The only two east Idahoans in leadership are Reps. Melvin Hammond, D-Rexburg, the House minority leader; and Darwin L. Young, R-Blackfoot, the House assistant minority leader. Hammond is the only Democrat state representative from east Idaho while Young was one of the leading architects in writing legislation for implementing the complex 1 Percent Tax Initiative law.

Along with Hammond and Young were other east Idaho lawmakers who were responsible for progressive, significant legislation, such as Reps. John O. Sessions, R-Driggs, who spearheaded legislation that brought \$17.8 million increased funding for state highways and plumped the 2 percent room tax to help promoted tourism; and Elaine Kearnes, R-Idaho Falls, who fought a valiant but losing fight to protect programs that help the aged, poor, disabled and mentally retarded.

Wielding a powerful hand in the appropriations as members of the dominant Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee were Sens. Dane Watkins, R-Idaho Falls; Vearl Crystal, R-Rigby; Mark G. Ricks, R-Rexburg, and Ray E. Infanger, R-Salmon, considered part of the clique known as the "dirty dozen." They were primarily responsible for the deep slashes in amounts recommended by the governor in public education, higher education, and many human services programs of the Department of Health and Welfare, and air and water quality management programs in the Department of Water Resources. They contended this was necessary to fit the costs within the revenue projection.

* * *

Sessions, as chairman of the House Transportation Committee; Mrs. Kearnes, who heads the House Health and Welfare Committee; and Rep.

Kurt L. Johnson, chairman of the House Education Committee, wield considerable influence as committee leaders. Over in the Senate who also held prestigious places as committee chairmen were Sens. Watkins, Local Government and Taxation; J. Marsden Williams, R-Idaho Falls, Resources and Environment; Ricks, Commerce and Labor; and Crystal, Agricultural Affairs.

Sen. Israel Merrill, R-Blackfoot and a member of the JFAC, voted for higher appropriations and in opposition to the conservative majority which prevailed on a 12-8 vote on controversial general fund appropriations.

The three newcomers, Sen. William L. Floyd, R-Idaho Falls; and Reps. Rich Orme, R-St. Anthony, and Martin Trillhaase, R-Idaho Falls; kept a general low profile but they participated actively in committee discussions and floor debates on a number of measures.

* * *

By virtue of his position, Watkins likely was one of the most publicized and controversial legislators at the Statehouse. He took the colorful lead in fighting against the INEL sales tax exemption bill, was a leading advocate in the budget-slashing movement, and opposed, then supported the 2 percent room tax measure which finally passed.

Among other legislators, Reps. Linden B. Bateman, R-Iona; Ray Parks, R-Blackfoot; Gary L. Paxman, R-Idaho Falls; and Wayne E. Tibbitts, confined most of their work in committee, rather than in House debate.

However, Bateman was instrumental in helping the passage of two important pieces of legislation. One provides for voting revenue bonds to rehabilitate and construct water projects and another enables the holder to change the nature and period of use of a water rights.

It was hard for legislators to cover themselves with glory in this Legislature which likely will be considered one of the most backwards in years. As usual, they sincerely did what they thought was best for the state. Most Republicans contended they did well in holding the budget; most Democrats thought there were unnecessary cuts. How the finances end at the end of the 1981 and 1982 fiscal years will prove who is right.

The undefendable actions in failing to appropriate sufficiently for education, for eliminating air and water quality programs, in failing to come to grips with genuine tax reform, in failing to implement alternative tax programs, like the severance tax, and in failing to give homes a break by allowing lower classifications — these are matters which should have been accomplished.