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The political pulse

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The national scene . . .

Idaho congressmen feast on tax break

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The recently enacted tax provision which represents a potential tax deduction of about \$19,000 a year for each member of Congress is now rightfully drawing weighty criticism from Common Cause, a volunteer organization dedicated to watching over the behavior of public officials.

Fred Wertheimer, Washington, president of Common Cause, blasts as "unjustified and inequitable" the special tax break that dramatically increases the amount of tax deductions available to members of Congress for their Washington, D. C., living expenses.

Common Cause has launched what it calls a nationwide "Give Taxpayers a Break" campaign against the special congressional tax deduction.

It amounts to \$19,650 for the 262 days the House was in session in 1981.

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Of the four Idaho delegation members, only Rep. George V. Hansen reported he has refused all of the tax break. U.S. Sen. Steve Symms reported he would take the full \$75 per day; U.S. Sen. James A. McClure decided on \$50 daily while 1st District Congressman Larry Craig was more modest with \$20 daily. This is in addition to the \$60,000 a year salary, plus many other federal benefits, including future generous pensions, they also enjoy.

Wertheimer announced organization members will work to get all representatives and senators to publicly disclose the amount of deductions for Washington living expenses they have taken off their 1981 federal income tax.

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Bob Wallin, Idaho Falls, representing Common Cause in east Idaho, already received Hansen's reply that he is taking no deductions. Other Common Cause members in Idaho have contacted other members of the Idaho delegation.

It is significant or maybe a coincidence that the two congressmen who face election this year take less or nothing of the deduction; McClure, who doesn't face the voters until 1984 settled for two-thirds, while Symms, not up for re-election until 1986, took the maximum.

It would appear the two senators are hopeful the taxpayers forget this dipping into more federal funds before they face the voters.

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These members of Congress are getting

additional federal money just for the "hardship" of living in the nation's capital, an advantage no others enjoy. It's the American taxpayers, for whom the Idaho lawmakers say they are fighting, who are footing the bill.

Wertheimer said rightfully in his news release to The Post-Register "At a time of national austerity when tens of millions of Americans are suffering economic hardships, this tax break represents a uniquely unfair windfall for members of Congress." Wertheimer also wrote to this effect in letters he sent to all members of Congress.

"Common Cause believes that Congress should move quickly to repeal the provisions," Wertheimer continued. "But until the provision is repealed citizens should be able to monitor its use".

It's amusing that Craig blasted the way Congress discussed the problem. He said in the House the action was taken on an unrecorded voice vote which means no public record was kept of how members voted. It's obvious the House members didn't want a record. Hansen, however, claims he voted against the measure.

Craig also procrastinates by saying a quorum was not present the first time the House voted on raising the living-expense deduction but Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill ignored members trying to get the floor to protest the way the vote was handled.

Craig, who is unmarried, even contended congressmen need a living-expense deduction similar to those for businessmen's expenses while traveling because their services require them to maintain residences in their homes states and in Washington. This, of course, doesn't wash as they live in Washington with their families. A home in their own state — if they own one — doesn't need to be kept up and is only incidental.

McClure was quoted as reporting he was unable to vote because he was in the hospital for a kidney stone operation. He said he would have voted against the measure because he would have needed to study it further.

Symms said he voted for the measure and that it is needed to help defray the costs of maintaining a home in Idaho and another in the nation's capital.

It would appear the increasing outrage manifested by taxpayers, in Idaho and throughout the nation, will compel Congress to rescind this blatant action. This is particularly so during this sensitive election year.