Batt labels Legislature progress too slow

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The political pulse

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BOISE — Lt. Gov. Philip E. Batt, former Senate president pro tem, characterized in a Post-Register interview the progress of the current Idaho Legislature as too slow, but expressed hope it would speed up after the 1 percent knot has been unraveled.

"This is a gigantic task," said Batt, referring to the 1 percent tax initiative implementation. He pointed out some key bills have been drafted and passed.

Batt said from his observation the committees are doing well, but many must wait until the 1 percent initiative impact is settled.

Funding for state employees looms as a major hurdle because of a controversy between the Republican leadership and Democratic Gov. John V. Evans.

"I would hope the politics of confrontation between them will not prevail," he said. "I hope they can sit down and work it out, otherwise it will lengthen the session. It will make the legislators more intransigent. I don't believe there has been a strong enough effort for compromise."

Specific cuts

Batt said the governor has made a good point of telling the legislators they should identify the programs they want trimmed, rather than leaving it to the departments. He said if the legislators want to trim 1,000 employees they should specify where it should be done.

"If they want programs knocked out they should say where the cuts should be made," he said.

Batt said he believed the Legislature is seeking to hold down the public employees too far.

He said no matter how much the Legislature will give to the schools it won't be enough to take up the slack. Many schools will need to get more funding.

He said he favored schools, counties and cities being given authority for override levels and local options to give them an opportunity for other revenue-raising measures. He pointed out they are subject to a majority vote of the people affected.

In other matters, he said that under no circumstances will the Legislature vote for more taxes, although this can be considered next year. He suggested increase in sales or income tax, or combination of both.

Batt acknowledged the new Republican leadership in the House and Senate is having its problems.

Batt said in his role of ombudsman the problems presented to his office center around issuance of food stamps. There are complaints of delay in getting stamps and questions of eligibility.

Food stamps

"Some people even point out abuses in the program but, whether out of frustration or acceptance, there has been a decline in criticism of the recipients of those stamps over the past decade," he said.

"The government used the commodity distribution program to accomplish two major goals. One was to alleviate hunger and the other to reduce farm surpluses. The two were closely intertwined. That is why food stamps today are under the inappropriate jurisdiction of the United States Department of Agriculture.

"The old program of commodity distribution was vulnerable to criticism on several counts. The selection of surplus staples often created a nutritionally deficient offering. Availability of supplies was not always dependable. The logistics of handling the bulky food made the system costly and inefficient. But the most telling argument was that the recipient lost a measure of dignity in accepting handout food products from a central distribution point.

"The counties finally were given the option of continuing the physical allocation of food supplies or going to a food stamp program. There was a rapid transition to the stamp system and it has been made mandatory."

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No. 2 official

BOISE — Lt. Gov. Philip E. Batt, the veteran Senate leader of recent years, tries out his big chair for his diminutive size. He said he enjoys his new role but sometimes misses the policy-making decisions in the State Senate.