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Legislative limelights . . .

Governor, Legislature get input for budget

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Both Gov. John V. Evans and the Legislature, represented by its Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee, have been going out into the field to get public comment that should help them ham mer out the 1983 fiscal year budget for the year beginning next July 1.

Both are finding people don't want new taxes but this is not a closed issue if the financial situation becomes so critical that some added revenue must be found. Those that could be considered are possibly severance, local option and sales taxes but the legislative mood indicates they won't be.

The fact next year is a political year always influences the governor and legislators to shy away from major tax increases or additions, new programs and anything else that might cloud their future in public office.

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After watching the JFAC tour and the governor's budget hearings in Idaho Falls and east Idaho last month it becomes obvious that all state agencies must further skimp on their already sparse diet.

The governor and JFAC were especially interested in ways they can save money and it's a foregone conclusion that no new programs will be instituted. Also coming out of their appearances was the conclusion that all public education, public, higher and vocational, will get a top priority. They take more than 70 percent of the state general fund budget, anyway.

That means the next largest department, Health and Welfare, must get along on its aready skeleton fare. This department suffered the most in the current fiscal year, primarily because the Republican controlled Legislature is opposed to human service programs except for "the truly needy."

It's an issue which will become one of the key ones in the forthcoming 1982 campaign and will hover over the next Idaho Legislature.

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Both the goveror and the JFAC agree state reveues have been holding better than expected but the anticipated 25 percent cut in federal funds will be the worst felt. They still believe a 10 percent budget increase is probable over the $422 million approved for the current fiscal year beginning Oct.1. This would indicate a budget of about $460 million for the 1983 fiscal year.

However, the most shuddering blow is the fact the loss of federal funds is expected to exceed 20 percent of the $180 million received the past year, indicating a shortfall of $30 million. If this is taken into consideration, it will mean the state fund increase will offset the federal loss, and leave only a $10 million hike. This would barely take care of inflation.

The governor's key point, in his own words, is "to keep state government lean but still performing for the people," and as a first step, he has reduced the number of state employes. He pointed out there are now 12 state employees for every 1,000 Idahoans, as compared with 16 when he took office, a 23 percent slash.

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Cost-saving programs are what both the governor and the Legislature are seeking. This includes such steps as utilizing space in State Buildings for office, eliminating duplicative programs and cutting out frills, such as nonesenical classes taught at some of the institutions of higher edjucation.

Also contemplated are keeping essential programs operating at a high level of efficiency while maintaining quality service, increased citizen comment with an open door policy, organizing a management task force of private industry executives whose past recommendations resulted in a $11 million savings, and reform the Idaho tax structure through reduction in the property tax, including expansion of the circuit breaker for senior citizens and income tax reductions.

It's commendable these forward steps are taken before they become enmeshed in the political chicancry that will dominate the 1982 campaign scene. This will start from the opening days of the Legislature in early January, escalating for the late May primary, then reaching a crescendo leading to the early November general elections.