Legislative limelights . . .

Special Idaho session considered improbable

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The threat of Gov. John V. Evans to call a special session of the Idaho Legislature this summer can be taken lightly, but it underscores the increasing financial plight of cities, counties and school districts.

It is highly unlikely the Democratic governor will summon the 105 members of the Idaho Legislature to come back during the hot summer days unless the financial situations for the local units of government get far worse than appears at present.

The governor told this writer he is leaning strongly for such action but acknowledges even the cities themselves are not in favor at this time. The governor observed city and county officials can't get a more accurate assessment of the financial picture until they begin setting their fiscal 1980 budgets and levies later this year.

The governor also pointed out action is needed for a certificate of need legislation to qualify this state to get an anticipated $12.3 million federal funding for health programs.

There have been 22 special sessions called in the 89-year-old history of the Legislaure, but all have immediately followed the regular sessions except for four, three days in July, 1935; four days in July, 1936; two days in August, 1961; and four days in July, 1964.

House Speaker Ralph Olmstead estimates a session of close to a week would cost upwards of $40,000.

The governor's threat is likely dangled to bring attention to the Republican controlled Legislature's failure to help cities, many of which face financial chaos unless they have a safety valve of override levies. This applies somewhat to counties, also.

The governor observed the Legislature gave the local school districts the right by majority vote for override levies, and already we see a number have taken this action, including Bonneville 93, Idaho Falls 91, Madison 321 and Snake River, 52, with a number of others also considering this action, including Firth, 59.

Even junior college districts are authorized to call override levies but not cities, a situation which rightfully unnerves the governor.

Most legislators, and nearly all from East Idaho, said before the session started they favored granting cities override rights in view of the 1 percent tax initiative, but bills to that effect failed to pass in committees or the floor.

The Legislature then compounded the situation by decreeing 1979 and 1980 budgets can't be more than 1978, a move attorneys say is open to legal questions.

Another merited complaint of the governor is the fear the legislators will be more hesitant to pass bills, that, in effect, favor tax increases in 1980, an election year. Yet such local option tax bills are subject to a vote of the city citizens affected.

It has always been a mystery why the Legislature has been reluctant to give cities more authority because they generally do a better job than the legislators in running their own affairs and provide more direct, responsive government.

There is little question the governor wants the local citizenry to know it was the Republican legislators not him, who now will be responsible for tight budgets, cuts in city service and likely resultant increased in service rates such as water, sewer, garbage collection, recreation and others.

Yet, Idaho Falls Mayor Thomas Campbell, who guides the helm of a city which is second only to Boise in budgets size, said he doesn't favor a special session. Neither does the Association of Idaho Cities and many other mayors.

They point out, rightfully, there is little reason to believe the legislator's mood will be different this summer than last winter.

Perhaps after the 1980 Legislature convenes next January the financial dilemma of the cities may be clearer, and this should give them urgent reasons for authorizing cities to enact local option laws.

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The certificate of need law which the governor cites as another compelling reason for a special session also can be considered in 1980. Sen. John Barker, R-Buhl, chairman of the senate Health, Education and Welfare Committee, points out the deadline is Sept. 30, 1980, for implementing such a law. It was Barker who pushed this legislation to successful passage in the Senate in the last session, but it stumbled badly in the House where the House Health and Welfare Committee turned it down 8-2.

The governor complains that already HEW has notified him that Idaho will not get a $360,000 federal health care planning allocation.

It would appear the governor feels he has a hefty political club to wield, but to actually call a special session that would cost upwards of $40,000 is highly improbable.