Legislative limelights

Primary bill hurdled many tough obstacles

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It's almost a Cinderella story of how the combined primary election bill passed the Idaho Legislature and then became law, with the reluctant signing of the measure Wednesday by Gov. John V. Evans.

It seemed to be almost dead at least three times during its tortuous passage through the Legislature, and again faced doom from a veto threat by the governor. It weathered the onslaught, and now will be tested for the first time next year.

The measure should generate considerably more political interest than in the past, and a preference primary in the spring likely will attract a number of presidential candidates.

It will bring a number of drastic changes, such as the early filing by candidates, including the precinct committeemen who will name the party convention delegates, and perhaps a more intensive general election campaign, because of having more time for preparation than when the primary was held in August. A long election campaign is not desirable, as Gov. Evans points out, but the summer itself limits campaign time. Intensive campaigning should only come in the fall. But no boundaries can be set on campaigning anyway.

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The combined primary faced its first threat early in the session when House Bill 13 was passed by the House by the wide margin of 45-23 to repeal the May presidential preferrence primary.

The Senate in all its wisdom took care of this matter later by voting the bill down 27-8, then passed its own bill, Senate Bill 1023 to combine the two primaries 23-12.

The House, angered by the Senate rejection, vowed to beat the Senate-passed bill, but House Speaker, Ralph Olmstead refused to refer the bill to the House Ways and Means Committee, which is the traditional burying ground of unwanted legislation.

Instead it went to the House State Affairs Committee, and much to the surprise of many, was sent to the floor by a 10-7 vote.

To most, the measure appeared permanently dead when the House voted 37-31 to put it on an amendment late in the session. Most interpreted this to mean it would be killed by amendment.

Among those leading the fight oppose the bill were Reps. Melvin Hammond, D-Rexburg; Wendell Miller, D-Idaho Falls, and Linden B. Bateman, R-Idaho Falls.

It was their plan to suggest amendments that would forever sink the measure. Among those was one for holding the primary election in September, which isn't a bad idea but does have problems for statewide and congressional candidates.

But a curious thing happened during the debate on the second to last day of the session. Many of the legislators heard for the first time the pros and cons for the combined May primary. They heard the reasons that September will not give time enough for state and congressional candidates to prepare for the general, and undoubtedly they were impressed.

When the smoke had cleared away, the House voted 53-17 for the May primary, surprising even the proponents by the size of the margin.

In all cases, the measure received bipartisan support. In the Senate, 14 Republicans and nine Democrats were in favor, against five Republicans and seven Democrats. In the House, 39 Republicans and 14 Democrats favored and 11 Republicans and six Democrats dissented.

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Even at that, it still faced Evans' veto threat, and he was frank to admit he leaned that way.

However, the newspaper editorials, wide margin in final passage and the appeal by many politically interested groups likely influenced Evans to change his mind.

He still expressed reservation, mainly because of a more costly and longer campaign, but acknowledged it would save the state about $300,000 to combine the two primaries.

The bill passage also had the salutatory effect of killing a Republican sponsored bill which called for 25 percent party convention endorsements for gubernatorial, congressional and senatorial nominees.

The news media, concerned legislators, League of Women Voters, College Republicans and other student leaders and many other groups must be given the credit for helping push through a commendable piece of legislation which appeared to be gasping its final breaths many times.

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Helped election reform

BOISE — Sens. Ron Twilegar, D-Boise, and Larry Craig, R-Midvale, from left, were two of the senators who led in the movement to enact legislation that moved the primary election from August to May, and also combined it with the quadrennial presidential preference primary.