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More travel pay for legislators

Idaho legislators are due to get slightly increased remuneration, but it won't be anything to shout about.

It does bring to mind, however, how the method to increase salaries and expenses came to be.

The Committee on Legislative Compensation under Chairman Ray Rigby, Rexburg attorney and former state senator, recommended at its final meeting last fall that legislators living outside the Boise area be given expenses for two more round trips to their homes during the legislative session. That would allow them seven trips.

Under the law, they have 25 days after start of the session — which this year is Thursday — to reject the increase. A survey of leaders indicates they will not refuse.

Rigby, who left the compensation committee last fall after serving on it since its creation 10 years ago, said committee members wanted to give lawmakers some help but did not feel a pay increase should be recommended in view of the sluggish Idaho economy.

"We thought a modest expense increase would do for the time being," Rigby said.

In round figures, the 126 legislators get about \$7,200 each a year,

divided about equally between salary and expenses.

The committee and legislators aren't attempting to keep the coming expense increase a secret, but they are not loudly publicizing it.

Latest records show Idaho legislators are among the lowest paid in the nation, ranking about 44th. It's a perennial joke around the Statehouse that they are paid what they are worth.

Myran H. Schlechte, longtime Legislative Council director, said legislators are paid \$30 daily while the Legislature is in session and \$7 daily when not in session, seven days a week. While in session, lawmakers who live outside the Boise area are paid \$60 in expenses daily because they must maintain a second home. Those in the Boise area are allowed \$30 in daily expenses.

They are allowed a few other fringe benefits, such as five round trips home during the session and \$30 per day when attending special committee meetings or other legislative events when the Legislature is not in session.

Schlechte said legislators accepted modest salary increases in 1976 and again in 1984, but they have refused

them more times than not.

What is interesting is how the Legislative Compensation Committee came about. It was a way for legislators to avoid having to vote directly for their own salary increases. It rocked the entire legislative pay system, not only in Idaho but in many other states, especially those adjoining.

In 1971, Idaho legislators voted themselves a pay raise of \$3,700 annually. That sparked a recall movement against two Idaho Falls Republicans, Sen. W. Fisher Ellsworth, an automobile dealer, and Rep. Aden Hyde, a weekly newspaper publisher.

After a bitter campaign, the two were recalled by narrow margins in a special election.

It is ironic that Ellsworth and Hyde were the only two to be recalled. In fact, of the 105 legislators at the time, 75 legislators voted for the pay hike, 24 were opposed and six did not cast ballots. Initial recall petitions were filed against a half dozen others, but none of those advanced to a recall election.

Gov. Cecil D. Andrus appointed what he considered to be two more moderates to the vacancies, Dane

Watkins as senator and Elaine Kearnes as representative.

The legislators devised the system of the special legislative compensation committee in 1976 to recommend automatic raises unless they were rejected. That committee promptly voted the lawmakers a \$1,725 annual pay hike, bringing the total to \$3,000 per year in salary. This salary, along with a \$1,000 increase in expenses, brought their reimbursements to \$5,820 a year. Since that time, about \$1,500 more in expenses have been added.

The federal government, either by coincidence or not, narrowly adopted the same kind of system in view of the mounting protests from constituents over hefty congressional pay raises.

The Commission of Executive, Legislative and Judicial Salaries, made up of private citizens, recommended congressmen's salaries be raised from \$77,000 to \$89,500. Pay increases to them, Cabinet members and other high government officials will automatically go into effect Thursday unless Congress suddenly decides to change it.

(Ben Plastino is a Post-Register columnist.)