Legislature limelights . . .

Legislature advances at record slow pace

Thurs Feb. 15, 1979

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Personal attendance at the 45th Idaho Legislature at Boise last week confirms what had been anticipated — the legislative wheels are grinding slowly.

This isn't bad because many of Idaho's lawmakers feel that in this year of 1 percent tax initiative limitation and governmental cost cutbacks austerity must be practiced on all fronts.

As a result, far less bills have been introduced than in the past and up to Wednesday, on the 38th day, only one bill has been passed, HB 11 which gives supplemental appropriation to the State Tax Commission.

House Speaker Ralph O. Olmstead dug out some figures last week from the Legislative Council office which reflects the slowdown. As of last week, only 176 bills had been introduced compared with 312 for the corresponding time a year ago, 356 in 1977, 274 in 1976 and 288 in 1975.

Olmstead observes there are usually some 1,200 bills introduced each year in the Legislature, but predicted it will fall far short of this year.

Placed in the hopper so far last week were 718, which is below the 886 in 1978, 789 in 1977, 874 in 1975 but above the 636 in 1975.

Olmstead points out this indicates committees are holding the bills rather than shoving them to the floor for introduction and action.

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Also noticed was the sharp reduction in committee meetings. Under the Legislature system, most major committees meet in the morning and the so-called minor committees in the afternoon.

The major committees are meeting with a reduced workload, while many minor committees are seldom in afternoon session.

For example, Sen. J. Marsden Williams, R-Idaho Falls, chairman of the Senate Resources and Environment Committee; and Sen. Dane Watkins, R-Idaho Falls, chairman of the Senate Agricultural Affairs Committee, acknowledged their committee's activities are well below a year ago.

The busiest committees are the House Revenue and Taxation Committee, which holds the primary responsibility for implementing the 1 percent tax initiative; and the Joint Finance Appropriation Committee which must set the budgets of the state agencies.

Reps. Steve Antone, R-Rupert, the Revenue and Taxation Chairman; and Sen. David Little, R-Emmett, and Rep. Doyle C. Miner, R-St. Anthony, co-chairmen of the Finance Appropriation Committee, are likely the busiest lawmakers under the marble-tinted State Capitol.

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The work of legislators was complicated when clumsy handling by the Republican leadership in both chambers resulted in the legislators failing to approve rejection of a 13.5 percent pay increase per year for the next two years. The wire services report a 27 percent hike, but this is for the biennium, not for the year.

Legislators pointed out it places the Legislature in a weak position to ask public state employes and agencies to accept no increase when they, in effect, voted themselves a noticeable increase.

Legislators are presently finding it almost impossible to trim the governor's recommended fiscal 1980 budget of $336 million to $319 million, which was the amount approved for the current year.

It must be observed that most of the 105 legislators this year are working less and being paid more. Actually the increased pay amounts to only $180,000 which is rather small when compared with the overall third of a million dollar budget.