Solons see modest hike in 1980 state budget

The 1980 Idaho Legislature . . .

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The political pulse

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(Editor's note: This is the fifth in a series of 16 articles giving the views of East Idaho legislators on the salient issues shaping up for the coming session.)

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Almost in one voice, all of the East Idaho legislators see only a modest increase in the fiscal 1981 state budget, most estimating the increase at 10 to 13 percent.

The fiscal 1980 general fund budget approved by the 1979 Legislature totaled about $357.5 million, which would indicate the new outlay will hover near $400 million.

Rep. Doyle C. Miner, R-St. Anthony, chairman of the House Appropriation Committee which has the most powerful hand in approving budgets, like many others, said "the budget will be whatever the present tax system will bring in."

He pointed out there have been some discrepancies in the amount of surplus anticipated at the end of the fiscal year. For example, he said, the governor has started with a $369 million base. If his figures are near accurate, Miner said he feels there will be about a 10-11 percent increase, placing the budget near $400 million.

"This kind of increase would barely offset inflation costs," he said.

Another member of the Joint Finance Appropriation Committee, Rep. Ray E. Infanger, R-Salmon, commented "I feel the state should again increase the mill levy relief to the local units. The state can well afford to do this."

Modest increase

Sen. Richard A. Egbert, D-Tetonia, dean of the Legislature with 30 years service, also a JFAC member, said he disliked setting any limit but felt there could be a modest 10 percent increase.

The newest member of the JFAC who was named this year, Sen. Dane Watkins, R-Idaho Falls, said to fully implement the 1 percent, the Legislature should further reduce the maintenance and operation levy.

"This would require an austere state budget to give as much property tax relief as possible," he said.

Rep. Wayne E. Tibbitts, R-Lorenzo, one of the leading water development advocates, said he felt "there should be more funding for state projects so that the state may protect and use Idaho's water for Idaho people, thus preventing out-of-state exportions of this great asset."

Rep. Darwin Young, R-Blackfoot, said he favored a greater participation by the state in school budgets and believes that all units of government should demonstrate spending restraints.

"I do not favor increase in health and welfare budget," he said.

Less money

Rep. Melvin Hammond, D-Rexburg, said there have been too many conflicting estimates on the anticipated revenue and budget, adding "I think we will have less money than most think. It will mean a tight budget."

Rep. John O. Sessions, R-Driggs, observed the natural growth of the state's general fund should provide minimal increases for most state agencies. Public schools, as well as cities and counties, may need some additional funding because of the 1 Percent Initiative, he added.

A Bonneville High School teacher, Rep. Linden B. Bateman, R-Iona, said "education should receive the greatest increase, perhaps because it has been behind the longest. The average amount of money spent per pupil in Idaho's public schools has been the lowest in the nation. We should closely follow the Governor's Management Task Force recommendation in making $18 million cuts in state government."

Sen. J. Marsden Williams, R-Idaho Falls, a former longtime member of the JFAC, said there should be no more than a 10 percent hike. He noted the governor said the income increase is placed at $42 million but the economy is soft in building, stock market, grain, potatoes and produce. He urged the Legislative Revenue Projection Committee to get to work immediately and release its figures.

No increase

Sen. Israel Merrill, D-Blackfoot, said he saw no need for increase but felt that DHW should not be the whipping boy, adding "those who thought it is overfunded are uninformed."

Rep. C. Wendell Miller, D-Idaho Falls, also agreed DHW shouldn't be "the fall guy" for funding cuts any more than any other state agencies."

He said there will be no need for increase in taxes and favored only a natural growth hike in the budget.

Rep. Vearl C. Crystal, R-Rigby, said he saw a need to increase employees salaries to keep up partly with inflation. He also said DHW will need some increase in its share of Medicaid in health facilities.

"There could be some areas in welfare cut," he said. "I think the state should provide about $30 million again in 1980 to education to provide 11 mills or more property tax relief."

Rep. Kurt L. Johnson, R-Idaho Falls, chairman of the House Education Committee, said "the state has the first obligation to dependent age children in both education, health and welfare."

He noted most state departments and agencies have begun cutting back by attrition and eliminating some service and programs.