

Statehouse sidelights . . .

Trucking rule changes face PUC, Legislature

Oct. 18 1979

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A subject which appears dry and complex but one which is of utmost importance to consumers is proposed deregulation of the interstate trucking industry.

The big truckers have made an impressive point in opposing such a plan, mostly saying it would create chaos and eventually bring reduction in services and increase in costs.

No so, says the little independent truckers who feel the present regulations bar them from free enterprise and competitive market. They feel the consumer is being gouged unnecessarily by present regulations, all slanted in favor of the large commercial haulers.

After studying the pros and cons, it appears there is a compromise point that would call for some easing of regulations, but not complete deregulation.

The American Trucking Association claims that the present regulatory system encourages competition, conserves fuel, discourages high freight rates and has kept the cost of freight transportation at a reasonable level. It contends the opposite effects will occur if interstate regulation is lifted.

Trucking is regulated in such a way that rules and red tape stand in the way of haulers who arrive at a destination with one type of cargo, and could, if the rules didn't prevent it, turn around and haul some other type of load back to the original point of departure. That's the term for "empty mileage."

Truckers estimate as many as 30 percent of the box-type heavy trucks travel empty because independent trucks are licensed to carry only specific types of products. They can't go out on the open market to "back-haul" other articles, so they are forced to run empty. That's a distinct advantage to the organized freightlines, which can haul just about anything.

Complete deregulation would be a long step backward, as some federal interstate regulation is necessary to avoid the old tariff wars among states. Regulations for cross-country truckers should be uniform, so the haulers don't have to worry about widely varying rules

every time they cross state lines.

The Idaho Public Utilities Commission which protects the consumer as well as business and industry appears to have taken a positive step toward the deregulation along the state lines as for interstate travel.

The IPUC intends to make it easier for carriers to back haul, setting a maximum and minimum charges for carrying goods. Under this provision, truckers would be able to charge anything within the limits of the IPUC tariff schedule, reflecting its desire to allow the market to set prices whenever possible.

The agency would allow truckers, or common carriers, to carry goods on contract basis, without applying separately for contract carrier status. The proposals would allow them to carry goods they can't carry now on backhauls, as long as one leg of their journey involves the carrying of authorized goods.

three IPUC commissioners, says it should be up to the State Legislature to make the changes, not the IPUC.

Another commissioner, Perry Swisher, insists the proposals do not amount to deregulation. They allow in his own words, some trucks to say they can haul someone's articles cheaper because of this variety. Some rates will be lower, some could go higher, he asserts.

Wickberg and Swisher say they fear reduced service to small communities and safety hazards. These are valid reasons, but they are overshadowed by the prospects of lower truck hauling rates, and greater competition.

The public has until Nov. 16 to comment on such provisions, such as establishing maximum and minimum rates, rather than specifics; and allowing backhauls more easily, so that trucks need not return empty.

The PUC must be careful not to overstep its bounds in areas which belong to the State Legislature. That's something for the Legislature to decide. It's one of the important problems confronting the legislators, already plagued by the restrictive 1 Percent Tax Initiative and all of its ramifications.