Statehouse sidelights . . .

Lenaghen builds case for energy department

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Idaho's top energy boss, Robert Lenaghen, outlined strong points here this week as to why the present Office of Energy should be upgraded to a department to help combat the mounting energy crunch.

Lenaghen acknowledged, in response to questions, the Idaho Legislature may not be all that enthusiastic but he asks for only a modest appropriation of $400,000. This is small compared with the current year's general fund budget of $357 million.

The department would be the 20th, the maximum allowed under the state government reorganization system enacted a half dozen years ago.

This newspaper editorially has endorsed such a proposal before Lenaghen advanced his viable reasons.

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Lenaghen presented persuasive arguments for taking such a step.

Such a department, he explained, would be divided into four bureaus — energy resource development, energy conservation, energy data analysis and bureau of public affairs.

He added the department, with support and directions from the Legislature, would allow state energy policy and planning to proceed with continuity and accountability.

He didn't close the door if the Republicans controlled Legislature should reject the proposal. He said the office, although limited, could carry out the organization plans as part of the governor's office, where it presently functions. This office, however, now depends primarily on federal funding. "All too little is being done in the important areas of resource development and energy analysis," Lenaghen said.

He pinpointed Gov. John V. Evans' policy for adequate supply, effective conservation and reasonable rates as a keystone in the energy tussle.

He notes the office and the governor already have set the priorities for assuring adequate supply of energy — conservation, renewable resources and the use of fossil fuels as an energy source.

He then pointed out that in spite of limited funding and staff, the office has managed to take some forward steps. It has created an office of geothermal technology to identify known geothermal resources and already has two major geothermal facilities operating; the governor has called for reasonable cost of energy; the office has provided assistance in the development of solar energy, and the office has provided assistance in the development of solar energy, and the office has coordinated and assisted efforts for retail gasohol outlets and farm gasohol stills.

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Lenaghen took particular pains to stress the importance of nuclear power, even to the extent that his major policy talk to the Eastern Idaho Council on Industry and Energy last Tuesday would be relased in Idaho Falls, not Boise.

He said he was impressed with what nuclear power could do, lauding highly the research and development under way at the Idaho National Engineering Laboratory.

He remarked Evans is now chairman of the National Governor Association subcommittee on nuclear power, where Evans has pushed the nuclear concept on the national scale. Lenaghen added the office wants to assure that nuclear energy will continue to play an important role in Idaho's energy picture, promising warm cooperation.

"It is far past time for the importance of Idaho's energy future to be recognized and for the state to take a firmer grasp on its energy resources," he concluded.

It was the EICIE which had an influential hand in ousting Earl Adams as the Office of Energy director three years ago, when he showed a cool approach to nuclear power. Ron Teunis, now the EICIE chairman, has been one of the guiding voices in the nuclear power thrust.

Idaho can't afford partisanship between Democrat Evans and the Republican-controlled Legislature on energy, second only to the 1 Percent Tax Initiative as a state problem.