

The same sad stories are told by legislators

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It's the same dreary refrain as Idaho legislators throughout the state predict a tight financial budget for fiscal year 1982.

The situation is painted so dark that most voters wonder if the state should take bankruptcy and start from scratch.

Yes, the money picture is shaky but it's hardly catastrophic as most of the lawmakers are complaining. There should be enough money to finance state government.

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Many of these same lawmakers who are howling the loudest wanted to give the taxpayers a handsome tax cut in the 1980 session, even though they must have known this was not possible. They were mostly the Republicans who obviously promoted the idea for political purposes. But this is the election year and this kind of move would have seemed politically smart.

There is little question such unforeseen factors as the Idaho Prison riot which could cost the state upwards of \$2 million, the St. Helens volcano ash fallout cleanup and overdue Medicaid payments of more than \$4 million aggravated the financial picture.

Gov. John V. Evans wisely ordered a 3.85 percent holdback last June which will help.

Another bright and more important spot are signs the sluggish economy is showing an upswing as reflected in better farm prices.

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State Sen. Dane Watkins, R-Idaho Falls, member of the Joint Finance Appropriation Committee, released some disquieting figures at a meeting last week of the Regional Mental Health Advisory Board.

After just attending a JFAC meeting, he reported sales and income tax is running 3 to 4 percent below the same time a year ago. This is made all the more serious because at 10-14 percent increase had been anticipated.

Motor fuel revenue, because of economy cars and use of less high priced gasoline, has slumped 15.5 percent.

The approved \$409 million budget for the current fiscal year has now been sliced to about \$380 million.

Watkins said the JFAC had expected to boost the 1982 fiscal year budget to \$440 million. In view of conditions, most of the committee members now feel that \$400 million is the most they can get. That means there is no leeway to meet the rising inflation costs.

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The legislators appear to be widely split on prospects for a sales or income tax increase, or both. House Speaker Ralph Olmstead posed the possibility, and this is somewhat of a surprise in view of his hard conservative views.

State Sen. Richard A. Egbert, D-Tetonia, dean of the Legislature and the ranking member of the JFAC, said, however he saw no chances for a tax increase, and he's probably right. He did reserve this prediction to say only the direct financial conditions might force it. Most East Idaho legislators also oppose a tax increase but admit grudgingly they might consider one if the financial situation is so critical so that one would be necessary.

Egbert said every program which is approved will get less money and fewer employees.

The discussions at this mental health board meeting indicated those who are handicapped, disabled, elderly and poor will suffer the most, much as they have in the past when there are cutbacks. For example, the Aid to Dependent Children was handed a stiff 14 percent cut from their meager income. No other programs were that hard hit.

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State Rep. Elaine Kearnes, R-Idaho Falls, the compassionate chairman of the House Health and Welfare Committee, shows sincere concern. She acknowledges there will be severe cutbacks on many programs.

"It will mean people's programs will get burned," she said, and that just about explains it.

Mrs. Kearnes sees the main problems as further implementing the 1 percent initiative, losing revenue sharing amounting to \$4.25 million in fiscal 1981 and \$8.05 million in fiscal 1982, and make up the shortfall of \$4 million or more in delinquent Medicaid payments, plus others.

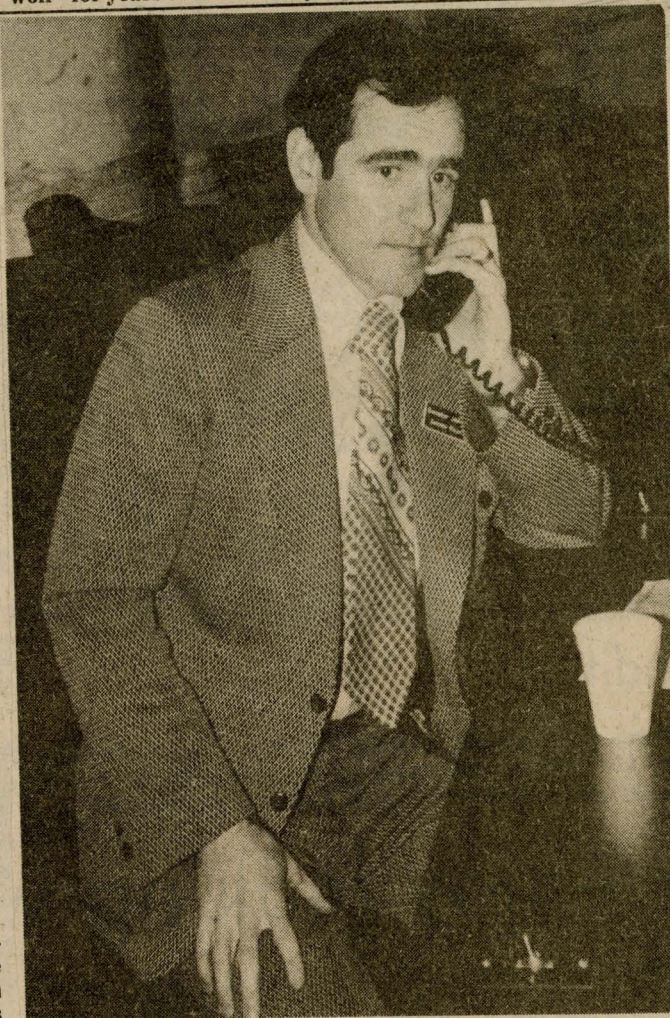
All these issues come under comprehensive review in the Idaho Falls League of Women Voters at their Candidate Fair Saturday afternoon.

Those appearing at this forum

raised concern on how the state will get enough money to run its business and many sounded the familiar refrain of telling the federal government to keep out of the individual's lives.

Legislators have been howling "wolf" for years over what they

said was the lack of money when they actually had plenty as witnessed by generous surpluses at the end of the fiscal year the last few years. Now, it's accounting time to see what they can actually do when there is a real problem.



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Senate power

BOISE — State Sen. James Risch, R-Boise, Senate majority leader is considered by most colleagues as the top power in the Idaho State Senate. Risch faces a tough re-election campaign.