

Politics

The Post-Register, Idaho Falls, Idaho, Sunday, May 1, 1983

C-9

The county scene

Election turnout size may determine hospital fate

By BEN J. PLASTINO

Post-Register political editor

The number of voters in the May 10 special election likely will determine the fate of the Bonneville County hospital initiative. A light vote could mean passage; the heavier the vote, the brighter the chances of failure.

This is established by looking over the records of past special elections. Avid supporters or opponents usually will get out and vote while those who are less adamant may stay home.

It follows that backers of the emotional hospital issue will take the time to cast ballots, while opponents who don't feel strongly may sit on their hands on election day.

Two previous special elections graphically illustrate the point. In August 1971, two of the state's more capable legislators, Sen. W. Fisher Ellsworth, and the late Rep. Aden Hyde, both Republicans, were recalled in District 30 because they voted for a pay increase, although 74 other legislators did likewise. Another special election shortly after defeated a proposal for permitting retail sales of wine in places where beer was sold.

In both cases there was a turnout of far less than 50 percent. Recall proponents turned out in full force and narrowly ousted Ellsworth and Hyde by about 250 votes each. In the wine election, religious and moral groups voted heavily to comfortably defeat the proposal.

Ellsworth and Hyde never did seek office again, but there is little question they would have been

vindicated in a general election.

The wine issue, however, did come up again in the 1980 general election and passed 17,569 to 14,127 in a record turnout.

The county hospital issue has no organized campaign on either side as is often seen in candidate recall and other statewide initiative elections. Instead, the campaign has been waged almost entirely through the news media. The Post-Register has printed an estimated 300 letters, and many articles on the issue, since a county hospital was first proposed last year.

Milton F. Adam, Voice of the Hospital-Served Public chairman, is the leading voice for the county hospital. Ed Vaughn, Idaho Falls Consolidated Hospitals executive director, and Gilbert Karst, IFCH board president, head the opposition but there have been other leading spokesmen.

Adams has been active in other public issues and this is his latest foray. He ran for City Council in 1979, finishing a distant seventh in a 14-candidate field for three positions.

Karst has served on City Council and in many civic activities. Vaughn has generally confined his efforts to hospital administration and opposition to the present initiative.

Bonneville County Commissioner Tom Loertscher has said publicly if the initiative were to pass it virtually could bankrupt the county because its annual tax revenues are only about \$3.5 million. A maximum 3 mill levy, provided for in the initiative, would only pro-

duce \$800,000. He has said an override levy would be likely.

Adam has suggested IFCH turn over Parkview Facility to the county, but Vaughn has said IFCH plans to continue its operations and that Parkview is not for sale. Adam's theme has been that hospital users should be offered a choice and that costs would be less.

Vaughn said the number of voters in the election and the will of the majority will determine what IFCH will do. IFCH could go ahead with plans to build its \$45 million facility, continue about its present operations, or make other modifications.

Most county hospitals are located in small counties in which private enterprise is not interested, he said, adding many county hospitals in the nation are asking such large firms as Hospital Corporation of America to take over management.

There are many ramifications to this highly controversial issue, which have been discussed and more likely will develop after a mini-study comissioned by the county is heard on May 3.

About 11,000 residents signed petitions to get the proposal on the ballot, almost twice the number required. However, as is often the case, many who signed to get the proposal on the ballot don't necessarily support it.

There are about 33,000 eligible voters in the county and records show only about a third turn out for special or primary elections. The election will cost about \$5,000, next to nothing if the county hospital proposal should pass.