LEGISLATIVE LIMELIGHTS . . .

Boise State College — Issue For A Generation

March 10, 1969

By Ben J. Plastino
Post-Register Staff Writer

BOISE, March 10 —The explosive Boise State College issue, which now has degenerated into a political football, likely will hold a dubious top controversial billing in the Idaho Legislature for this generation.

That's because Idaho cannot afford three top flight universities until the tax base and the population is about double what it is now.

One has only to look around at Idaho's more affluent neighboring states of Oregon, Washington and Utah, where there are two major state universities each, although they do have some degree granting colleges on lower levels.

Then there's Montana, about the same population as Idaho, with two top schools; and Wyoming, a smaller population state, with only one.

When this writer took a first hand observation at the Idaho Legislature the last week, he asked the three Southeastern Idaho state senators remaining in the upper chamber who voted for admittance of Boise State into the higher education system in 1967 why they had done so.

They are State Sens. James V. Evans, D-Malad, Senate minority leader, now a leading gubernatorial contender; J. Cecil Sandberg, D-Blackfoot; and Thomas McAteer, D-Pocatello.

Those three along with State Sen. Orval Hansen, R-Idaho Falls, now U.S. Congressman, were the only ones from the 16 East Idaho counties who voted for admission of BSC.

In the lower chamber, the only two Southeastern Idaho state representatives who favored BSC are no longer there. They are State Rep. Darrell V. Manning, D-Pocatello, who failed in his bid for congressman against Orval Hansen in last November's general election, and State Rep. Pat K. Harwood, R-Rigby, now a public relation executive with Simplot Co. at Caldwell.

The BSC admission won by two votes or less in each chamber.

Evans, Sandberg and McAteer—and this is borne out by virtually all other legislators serving at that time—said they were told by the Boise proponents that if BSC were admitted to state status that no undue demands would be made for state appropriation, for at least four years to come.

It was also pointed out that Boise is nearly 300 miles from the U. of I. at Moscow and ISU at Pocatello. They said that many Boise area students who could not afford to go to Moscow or Pocatello might be able to receive some higher education learning and still hold down jobs in a comparatively large population center such as Boise. On the face of it, their arguments sounded plausible and reasonable.

They then trotted out a medical school proposal which they offered to junk if the BSC admission were adopted.

This writer knows that behind the scene the Boise proponents were never actually serious about the state medical school venture at this time —that it was used as a compromise bait.

This writer two years ago and repeatedly ever since warned that BSC admitted at this time would create the feared sectionalism issue which is rampant today, but even more deplorable, siphon money away and gradually downgrade the U. of I and ISU.

McAteer and Evans now admit they shouldn't have trusted Boise. Sandberg is less positive, saying that perhaps the Boise population center of Southwest Idaho should have a college.

His colleagues point out to him however, that his vote has harmed neighboring ISU.

Such is the history of the BSC movement which most veteran legislators say might be justified, say, in 10 or 15 years, but not now.

* * *

The Greater Boise Chamber of Commerce blew the situation wide open last summer by brazenly recommending BSC get $26 million while U. of I. and ISU split $23 million of the higher education fund the coming biennium.

Many Boise people repudiate their chamber of commerce demand; yet, some members of that committee are Boise legislators!

Gov. Don W. Samuelson has thrown his support to the BSC proponents in what political observers and legislators assert is a bid for Boise support in his re-election bid next year.

The governor has engaged in a newspaper battle not only with the two university presidents, Drs. Ernest Hartung of the U. of I. and William (Bud) Davis of ISU, but also with the State Board of Education in general and its chairman, Eldon W. (Dick) Smith, Rexburg, in particular.

The governor is supported by a tight coalition of Senate Republicans, in which the Boise contingent forms the nucleus.

There is little question the governor will replace the present education board with his own handpicked men when their terms expire and that he is openly hostile to the two university presidents. His two recent appointments, say legislators, are mediocre ones replacing two highly successful businessmen.

The governor is insisting on close to the $9.2 million he and the state board of education recommended for BSC. He apparently cares little what the U. of I. and ISU get, and even recommended drastic cuts for each. The Senate Democrats, most from North Idaho and Bannock County, don't agree and they have the power to block his move in these closing legislature days.

* * *

The Senate Republicans, or at least most of them, don't have two-thirds majority to suspend the rules and the Democrats can keep them tied up with a myriad of parliamentary maneuvers. This can include requirement of full reading the bills which could take days.

The Democrats in what appears clever maneuverings headed by Evans and State Sen. Ray W. Rigby, D-Rexburg, assistant minority leaders, are putting themselves in the light of defending U. of I. and ISU on the higher education level, bidding for at least $19 million for public education, and calling for higher compensation funds and benefits for the working man.

In fact, Smith commended the Democrats for their effort in party caucuses, not the Republican.

Of course, it is well known in political circles that Smith, a Republican and former Madison County senator, is eying the gubernatorial race against Samuelson in the 1970 primary. He discounts this ambition at this time but as state board chairman, he insists he is concerned with the higher education system.

Whatever happens in this session, is only another page in history of the rough and tumble of Idaho politics.

But what occurs now will serve as political fodder for the 1970 elections.

* * *

It is interesting to note that despite it being inimical to the East Idaho interests, all of the East Idaho Republican senators voted to cut the ISU and U. of I. budgets but increase the BSC in a vote Saturday.

They apparently placed partisan politics above those of the institutions.

Voting in favor of BSC increased budget but less for U. of I. and ISU were Republican State Sens. J. Marsden Williams and W. Fisher Ellsworth, both of Idaho Falls; John Andreason, Arco; and James Ellsworth, of Leadore.

It reflects graphically that the governor is running the show despite what the legislators say.