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Our View: 2008 Legislature ignores long-term needs

- Idaho Statesman

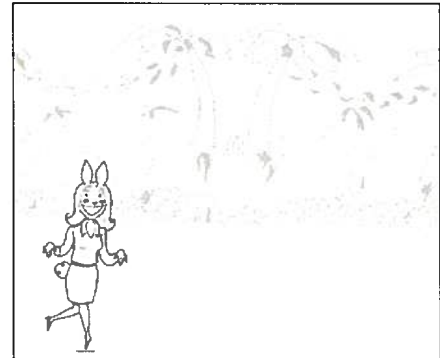
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The 2008 Legislature arrived 13 weeks ago facing a full agenda and, by the governor's accounting, sitting on a full surplus.

The Legislature adjourned Wednesday short on accomplishments and dollars alike.

At 87 days, the 2008 session went on too long and achieved too little. Since the Legislature's primary job is to balance the budget, a volatile state economy certainly will affect the Legislature's work product, or lack of the same. Lawmakers spent much of the session reacting to tax collections that consistently fell short of forecasts.

The job was made more difficult - and more time-consuming - when Gov. Butch Otter opened the session with an ambitious spending plan.

The Otter budget promised plenty of goodies. Some proposals were outlays of one-time surplus cash. Otter also sought to commit Idaho to a pair of big, ongoing expenditures: \$78 million to pump up the state employee and school teacher pay scale with 5 percent raises, and some \$200 million of permanent new fees to repair or build highways.

When Otter began work on his budget last fall, he thought the economy would support it. "It was a rosier picture back in November," Otter spokesman Jon Hanian said Friday. So in January - despite signs of a national economic downturn - Otter unveiled a budget that raised expectations.

Lawmakers - especially veterans of Idaho's last round of budget cuts and temporary tax hikes - were skeptical. "We've got real squishiness in the economy," Sen. Dean Cameron, co-chair of the House-Senate budget committee, said in a Jan. 21 meeting with the Statesman editorial board. On Feb. 7, "squishiness" had a number affixed to it, when January tax collections came in \$38.5 million below projections.

Lawmakers and Otter spent the next two months revising budgets and revamping expectations. The pay raises shrunk to 3 percent for state employees and 2.5 percent for teachers. This didn't go over well with public employees who were hoping for more money, or with lawmakers hoping to invest more in state government's human infrastructure.

Motorists fared far worse. The highway system received no infusion of new fees or taxes. A shortfall - pegged by the Idaho Transportation Department at \$240 million a year - will only increase between now and the start of the 2009 session.

This is a recurring theme from the 2008 session. Lawmakers and Otter kicked the highway problem down

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the road - a pothole-laden road at that. They did not allow local governments to raise sales taxes for local roads and public transportation systems. They did little to address prison overcrowding. All of these needs will be costlier next year, or whenever the state gets around to addressing them.

The 2008 Legislature completed its constitutionally mandated chore of balancing this year's budget. In the struggle to finish this job, lawmakers left the really hard work for future sessions.

"Our View" is the editorial position of the Idaho Statesman. It is an unsigned opinion expressing the consensus of the Statesman's editorial board.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

TEN BAD CALLS

1. Highway shortfall

Legislators came to town staring at a \$240-million-a-year transportation shortfall - and put no new money into highways.

2. Local-option taxes

Lawmakers refused to give local governments the ability to seek local sales taxes for roads or public transportation. The upside: The Senate rejected a House-passed local-option constitutional amendment that actually would have made it tougher for local governments to address their needs.

3. Flunking pre-K ... again

Another year, and another impasse over pre-kindergarten education. The logjam: Key House GOP leaders remain steadfastly opposed to taxpayer-funded pre-K.

4. Teacher merit pay

Like many issues in 2008, this one turned out to be all talk and no action. Legislators and educators remain stuck on a fundamental question: Should school teachers get paid for performance, and based on what criteria?

5. Tax breaks: business as usual

The Legislature did repeal one business tax incentive: 2005's so-called "Albertsons bill," which went unused by any company. Meanwhile, \$1.6 billion in state tax exemptions survived intact.

6. Open space

An impressive coalition - including resource industries, hunters and environmentalists - agreed on a bill offering tax credits for landowners who agree not to develop in fish and wildlife habitat. Unfortunately, House conservatives were unimpressed, and the bill died.

7. Global warming? What global warming?

A resolution directing state agencies to study Idaho's contribution to climate change died on the Senate floor. Bills to encourage "green" construction of schools and public buildings also stalled.

8. Junk food junkies?

The Senate said no to a non-binding resolution encouraging schools to get junk food out of vending machines.

9. Child death panel

Forty-nine states have panels to investigate child deaths. A bill to assemble an Idaho panel to review all "sudden, unexpected and unexplained" child deaths stalled in the Senate.

10. Ethics

The revolving door remains open - allowing lawmakers to immediately parlay public service into private sector lobbying. This good-government issue has degenerated into a partisan issue.

OUR VIEW THE 2008 LEGISLATURE

TEN GOOD MOVES