

Otter talks big about letting Idaho go without

Jim Fisher

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What has Butch Otter been up to in the nation's capital? Within days of appointing a bipartisan panel to review plans for spending money from federal stimulus legislation, Idaho's chief executive is listed among those Republican governors now in Washington, D.C., telling Uncle Sam to take his cash and shove it.

Saturday, the New York Times reported that "the governors of Alaska, Idaho, Mississippi, South Carolina and Texas have said their states may not want to meet the conditions that accompany the money or expand programs that will have to be paid for by the state once the stimulus money runs out."

And Monday, an editorial in the Wall Street Journal praised Otter and four other governors for "saying thanks but no thanks to some of the \$150 billion of 'free' money doled out to states."

What the Journal lauds, however, even many conservative Idahoans are unlikely to appreciate. It is one thing for Otter - who as a congressman voted to greatly expand the federal Medicare program - and members of the state's congressional delegation to badmouth the stimulus bill passed by Democrats and three Republican senators. But it is quite another to turn away money that Idahoans and their offspring will end up paying their fair share of.

What's more, some members of the executive panel Otter asked to review stimulus money, including two Democratic former governors, must wonder what Otter is telling his fellow members of the National Governors Association and the national press that he isn't telling them.

Before leaving for the association meeting in Washington, Otter did agree to use stimulus money to increase unemployment benefits in the state by \$25 a week. And it's a good thing he did, too. That is some of the wisest spending in the federal bill, because it will help jobless people at the same time it pumps cash into the economy. Yet some other governors are objecting even to that provision in the bill.

At the same time, though, the Times quotes a lawyer for Otter, David Hensley, as objecting to a requirement that Idaho spend 3 percent of a big bundle of transportation money coming to the state on "transportation enhancement."

"I never imagined that Congress would tell the state of Idaho that they have to spend \$5.5 million on bike paths or pedestrian lanes," Hensley said.

Do Hensley and Otter oppose making it easier for people to ride bicycles or walk to places where they would otherwise drive cars - and helping stimulate the economy in the process? And even if they do, can they possibly expect the federal government to send money to the states with no instructions about how it is to be spent? It isn't as if state government refrains from doing the same with much of the money it sends to Idaho's school districts and local governments.

What appears more probable here is that Otter is aligning his Washington rhetoric with those Republican governors, like Louisiana's Bobby Jindal and South Carolina's Mark Sanford, who talk about rejecting stimulus money, rather than those, like California's Arnold Schwarzenegger and Florida's Charlie Crist, who welcome help their states badly need. But back in Boise, Otter will listen to the smart counsel of his stimulus advisers and use the cash to stave off severe distress in his state.

He will, in other words, put the money where his mouth isn't. - J.F.