

It's a draw in Boise, but not between winners

Jim Fisher
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Let's answer right now the question of who will win the standoff between Gov. Butch Otter and the Idaho House's Republican majority over maintenance of state roads:

Neither.

A governor who lets his top legislative priority of the last two years sit unaddressed by leaders of his own party until after most legislative sessions have ended, and then starts vetoing bills en masse to force his will on legislators who never had any intention of supporting him is inept. A legislative session is a time for the chief executive and the legislative branch to come together, which has happened in Idaho even when they were of different parties. But when a governor and a legislative chamber in which 75 percent are members of his party can't do that, it's a train wreck.

A good engineer would have seen it coming, and looked to build a coalition with those Republicans on his side and members of the other party who had every reason to support investing in good roads. Instead, Otter almost went out of his way to alienate Democrats, by insisting that public education and state workers be forced to suffer the pains of economic recession because those outside state government were. And he didn't drop the stiff arm until the Republican tide against him rose further, when he got more Democrats to support a higher gas tax by playing nice.

None of this should be taken to justify those House members who refuse even to raise the gas tax 2 cents to meet a big backlog in road maintenance, though. At least Otter is right on the issue, and they couldn't be more wrong.

People who know what they are talking about say each dollar not spent on road work now will cost \$6 later. People who don't know what they are talking about, including legislators like Riggins Republican Rep. Paul Shepherd, say the Idaho Transportation Department needs no more money at all to get needed work accomplished - "if they'd just prioritize," Shepherd says.

Oh, sure.

The problem with the current House is twofold. First, voters have elected the biggest group of right-wing Republican ideologues to the House in several decades. And second, the leaders those members chose have put loyalty and ideology over responsibility in making committee assignments.

Speaker Lawrence Denney put Rep. Phil Hart, R-Athol, who refused to pay his federal income tax for seven years, arguing in a book the tax was unconstitutional, on the Revenue and Taxation Committee. And he made Rep. Bob Nonini, R-Coeur d'Alene, an antagonist of teacher unions and an opponent of early childhood education, chairman of the Education Committee.

And who is Denney's Transportation Committee chairwoman? Rep. JoAn Wood, R-Rigby, who is not only one of the chamber's most rigid conservatives but who with her late husband operated a small trucking company.

If you are looking for winners among this bunch, you are wasting your time. But not everybody connected with this legislative session should be counted a loser. There is still a minority of House members, from both parties, who have put the needs of the state first. And there is still the Senate, which despite a loopy moment or two has proved a corner of adulthood in Boise's big Romper Room. - J.F.