

Talks of spending cuts, support for freedom mark a good start for the Legislature

By Wayne Hoffman

Roller coasters scare me. I will not get on one. Roller coasters are less frightening than the Legislature, but it's hard to avoid the ride, especially if we want to protect our freedoms. So I'll climb on board and scream like a little girl the whole way -- until spring when lawmakers head home.

It's unfortunate, but you could fill a garbage truck with all the bad, statist ideas that will be written into bill form this year. The good ideas -- the ones that promote freedom and limited government -- you could fill a thimble. Thus, my anxiety is not misplaced.

I've been around the Legislature a long time, and this legislative session has begun with a different feel to it. When was the last time a governor proposed cutting funding for government television and eliminating other agencies? Nitpickers like me will say that Gov. Butch Otter could have done more. (We still have three separate government agencies that are supposed to help people get jobs, for crying out loud). But the start of this legislative session beats other legislative sessions in which the resolve to cut government simply didn't exist at all. In 2003, lawmakers quickly followed the path of least resistance and raised taxes. Hopefully the Legislature will expand on the executive branch's budget cut recommendations.

My hope extends to other areas. Lawmakers appear serious about passing legislation that would protect the rights of Idahoans to purchase health insurance if they choose to do so. A bill was introduced last week, and the concept has some momentum behind it. A bill would that would stop political parties from collecting state taxpayer money is already on its way to the House of Representatives for a vote. That legislation appears to have near unanimous backing.

Still, the statist ideas that government has all the answers continue to wield support. This legislative session, the state's many urban renewal agencies will try to convince lawmakers to overhaul the state's urban renewal district law and expand the powers of these districts. Under a draft proposal in circulation, urban renewal districts could start an economic development project if jobs would be created through the project. The existing law says urban renewal districts are supposed to help eliminate urban blight, not create new jobs. One draft that I saw has urban renewal districts gaining new authority to build and operate transit centers, which is consistent with some of the nonsense we're seeing in southwest Idaho, where Boise's urban renewal agency has been working diligently to promote the development of a government streetcar system.

Other zany proposals would make it illegal to talk on cell phones while driving, undermine the Electoral College, make it easier to raise taxes and expand public indebtedness without a vote of the people. Last week, education organizations were proposing new taxes on bottled water and soda pop in order to fund public schools. Such ideas only have currency in the Capitol if the public fails to pay attention and leaves lawmakers to their devices.

And with the public thoroughly engaged this winter, I'm hearing an increasing parade of lawmakers talking about the Constitution, states' rights, limited government, lower taxes and removal of government barriers to the free market. That's a good sign -- one that could mean it

won't be so bumpy a ride after all. Still, we're holding on for dear life - and we're watching vigilantly -- until the final gavel falls.