

Escaping without tax hikes

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The legislature will likely adjourn this week without raising taxes. That's to the chagrin of some of our more liberal friends, who were hoping they'd be able to use the parliamentary procedures of the House of Representatives to force lawmakers to take up an increase of \$1.25 in the cost of a pack of cigarettes. House Democrats forced the chamber's clerk to read bills aloud, word for word through to completion, in order to stall the Legislature's efforts to finish its work.

By holding the legislature hostage to a time-consuming procedure, Democrats hoped to convince lawmakers it was for the greater good and a matter of expedience to just go ahead and introduce legislation to raise the cigarette tax. I don't know the political science behind the minority party's reasoning (they didn't consult me on it), but I'm sure they figured the public overwhelmingly supports a cigarette tax increase, overwhelmingly wants more money for government services and that the public would rally in support. They figured (I surmise) the public would be alarmed that the majority party is "blocking" efforts to introduce a popular tax for popular programs. But none of those things happened. The reason is the public doesn't support a tax increase, as evidenced by the November election results. Given a choice between candidates who supported higher taxes and those who don't, most Idaho voters selected those candidates who promised to not raise taxes. Given the choice between those who proposed more spending for government services and those who promised to either hold the line or cut spending, most Idaho voters chose candidates who promised to keep spending down.

That's why the supporters of a tax increase are unable to even summon the votes to introduce their legislation. It's not the majority party, therefore, that is blocking the tax increase; it's the voting public who feel they're taxed enough already and want taxes to go down, not up.

But a cigarette tax increase is more popular than a general tax increase. It is human nature for people to be willing to support taxes that they won't have to pay. The old saying "Don't tax me, don't tax thee, tax the guy behind the tree" applies in the case of cigarette taxes. It's the same reason hotel taxes are so popular. It seems like a victimless crime.

Unfortunately, the delay tactics that are being used to extort the Legislature into raising taxes do come with a cost: about \$30,000 a day. So, by the time the legislative session wraps up, the only thing that will happen is taxes will remain the same, but taxpayers will be out the cost for every hour and every day that lawmakers were in Boise when they didn't have to be.

The fact that lawmakers did not give in to the delay tactics is extremely satisfying.

Despite lawmakers' unwillingness to cut spending by as much as I would have liked, there is something positive to be said about legislators who were unwilling to bend or buckle to coercion in order to validate a tax increase. I think they recognized what we all recognize: While it is painful to have to sit and listen to a 30-page bill being read aloud word-for-word, it is not as bad as the pain that a tax increase would cause hardworking Idahoans.