

Idaho's sleepwalking governor showed up Monday

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Anybody who subscribes to Woody Allen's notion that "80 percent of success is showing up" wasn't watching Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's State of the State address Monday.

Otter was present to deliver his sixth session-opener of Idaho's Legislature. Like his predecessors, it's his job to set an agenda. Some governors offer a detailed blueprint for governing. Others issue a call to action on a handful of initiatives.

But Otter's six-page, 28-minute address was devoid of either. He offered a porridge of feel-good slogans - jobs, education and tax cuts - that was thin on passion and weak on detail. Filling in the blanks will be lawmakers who at the end of a 90-day session likely will find a governor willing to sign most anything they put on his desk.

Take, for instance, the governor's signature issue this year - creation of state-based insurance exchanges. Under the national health care reform act, individuals and small businesses are entitled to shop for the best rates through these exchanges. Health care reform also uses these devices to deliver insurance subsidies for the working poor.

No fan of the health care act, Otter nonetheless has agreed to use \$20 million in federal money to set up a state-based exchange. A state operation would save hundreds of Idaho jobs in the insurance sector, some of them located in Lewiston. And ceding Idaho's exchange to be operated by the feds might cost the state \$300 million in federal Medicaid funds, he said last week.

Monday, the issue merited four paragraphs of waffling on page five.

"My decision to allow the application to be submitted simply preserved the opportunity for you and all Idahoans to discuss our options and decide what's best for our citizens," he said. "In the next few weeks we will continue to have those discussions, weighing all our options and the potential outcomes associated with each of them."

Same thing with tax relief.

Otter put \$45 million on the table.

Then he left it to lawmakers to decide:

- Should it go to homeowners or business owners through a property tax cut?
- Should the poorest of Idaho's citizens benefit from a sales tax break?
- Or should the money be parceled out to wealthier people through an income tax cut?

"There remains a wide diversity of opinion on how best to target tax relief," he said. "I look forward to hearing your proposals. ..."

Otter did get specific on funneling money to pay for school Superintendent Tom Luna's classroom technology overhaul, restoring some of the huge losses higher education suffered and replicating Utah's successful technology transfer programs. He wants to put \$60 million in the bank and give state workers a one-time bonus - assuming that the economy delivers a 5.8 percent boost in state tax revenues next year.

But notice what was missing.

Three years ago, Otter almost busted his veto stamp insisting that lawmakers do something about the state's inadequately funded highway and bridge network. After lawmakers refused to follow him, Otter stopped leading. He quit talking about raising fuel taxes and registration fees. About the only thing Otter had to say about transportation this year was a fond farewell to retiring Transportation Board Chairman Darrell Manning.

Last year, the state balanced its budget by depriving some of Idaho's most vulnerable citizens of health care. Nowhere in Otter's address does he mention rescuing those people.

Nothing about natural resources, energy policy, agriculture or general government.

Not a word about whether the state should move toward collecting sales tax due on the mushrooming Internet-based retail trade or whether Idaho should boost its cigarette tax, one of the lowest in the country.

Zilch about tightening Idaho's ethics laws in response to official misbehavior.

So yes, Otter fulfilled his obligation. But if this was any indication, you'd have to say Otter intends to sleepwalk through his second term. And would you believe it? He now wants a third. - M.T.