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Tax cuts, teacher salaries highlight 2012 session

By ALEX MORRELL, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — It took till the final day, but deals securing \$35 million in tax cuts, reloading the state's rainy-day fund and restoring teachers' salaries highlighted accomplishments that earned the 2012 legislative session top marks from Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter.

At an end-of-Legislature address in his office on the Capitol's second floor Friday, Otter lauded the trio of bills passed on the session's 81st day that Otter targeted as top priorities during his State of the State address back in January.

"I think it was a great session. In fact, I would give a good solid 'A' to the Legislature," Otter said.

The Republican lawmakers who flanked him during the address spent most of the past week — and much of the session — wrangling over how best to apportion a surplus topping \$100 million that has signaled Idaho's economic recovery.

It was refreshing quandary for some senators and representatives who have spent recent years debating how to slash costs and plug budget holes.

They settled on splitting it three ways: a tax break for the Idaho's corporations and top earners that is expected to net a family of four earning \$100,000 annually about \$71 in relief; restoring about \$35 million over five years to teachers' salaries that would have been cut under public schools chief Tom Luna's "Students Come First" education reforms; and a \$34 million infusion to the state's rainy-day savings accounts depleted during the recession.

The tax cut may not be a game changer to most Idahoans, but Otter maintained it's key to boosting the state's economy and luring in new businesses.

"It sends a good psychological signal," Otter said.

Democrats, who found among the session's passed bills only a thin silver lining, slammed the going-home package Friday.

"The top consideration for the governor and the majority leaders was a \$35 million redistribution of wealth to the wealthiest Idahoans while the Luna laws mandate ongoing reductions for classroom instruction to continue for many years," said House Minority Leader John Rusche, D-Lewiston.

Here's a rundown of the rest of the approved bills that generated buzz this session:

OIL AND GAS DRILLING: Generating a gusher of debate, this measure prohibits local governments from enacting ordinances that ban gas drilling. The legislation sparked further controversy when Democrats accused Sen. Monty Pearce, R-New Plymouth, of not adequately disclosing a conflict of interest on the measure. An ethics investigation was ultimately dismissed.

HEAD INJURIES: Idaho is following the National Football League's lead in getting tough on concussions. With athletes bigger and stronger than ever, the state is requiring schools to develop rules to protect youth athletes from punishing hits to the head that pose devastating long-term impacts.

END OF LIFE CARE: This bill aims to ensure doctors and nurses abide by requests of dying patients and their families for life-prolonging treatment. Proponents say this measure closes a loophole allowing doctors to deny end-of-life care if they've tried and failed to find another physician willing to treat the patient.

TEXTING WHILE DRIVING: Idaho joins the at least 35 other states that will ticket drivers who put their thumbs on their handheld devices instead of the steering wheel. The legislation has stalled in recent years, but lawmakers pushed the measure through, which slaps violators with an infraction costing \$85, including court fees. "After three years of debates, our roads will finally be safer because we've banned texting while drive," Rusche said.

ANIMAL CRUELTY: Idaho removes itself from the short list of states that don't have felony penalties for animal cruelty. Three convictions in 15 years will trigger the harsher violation, leaving North and South Dakota as the only states without a felony animal abuse law.

MASSAGE LICENSING: Lawmakers want to make sure people aren't getting rubdowns from amateurs. They approved a bill requiring massage therapists to certify their training by paying up to \$200 for a state-issued license. The plan was pushed by massage therapists around the state whose industry is becoming a common part of medical recovery treatments. Opponents labeled it a government intrusion that would kill jobs.

CHARTER CAPS: A state cap limiting Idaho to six new charter schools each year was eliminated. Proponents say the restriction has generated a backlog of interest among parents and others in creating more. Foes fear expanding charter schools too quickly could suck money away from traditional public schools.

BOISE COUNTY BAILOUT: It took a tumultuous route, but the life raft to help Boise County pay a \$5.4 million federal judgment eventually cleared the Capitol. The measure allows the county to exceed state limits on pursuing low-interest bonds to pay off the debt, helping the county meet its court-ordered obligations through a tax increase.

CHEERS FOR BEERS: Lager lovers rejoiced at the passage of a bill lifting restrictions on investing in more than one company that brews beer. Throwing out the antiquated measure could generate 25 new jobs initially by letting brewers who make less than 30,000 barrels of beer per year expand. The brouhaha over beer was waged by professional brewer Fred Colby, who owns Laughing Dog Brewery in Ponderay.

JUDGES' PENSIONS: Lawmakers cleared a plan to plug a \$14 million hole in judges' retirement accounts by increasing retirement contributions from the state and judges by 50 percent and raising civil filing fees by \$8.

UP TO THE CHALLENGE: Lawmakers gave the go-ahead for a military-based program in north-central Idaho targeted at high school dropouts. The plan would allow state alternative school funding to go toward the Youth Challenge Program in Pierce. The program is expected to produce 50 new jobs in the economically depressed region that's been hurt by its moribund timber industry and serve more than 200 at-risk kids.

OTTER'S IGEN: Another of the governor's top priorities, this legislation dedicates \$5 million to bolster university research and businesses that can help grow Idaho's economy. The program directs \$1 million toward grants for startup businesses or technologies, as well as \$2 million each for the Center for Advanced Energy Studies and Idaho's three research universities. Otter called it "a downpayment" on Idaho's future.

SUICIDE HOTLINE: Lawmakers approved funding for a hotline for those in danger of ending their lives. Idaho — the only state without its own suicide prevention hotline — will dedicate \$110,000 to get the program off the ground. It will then rely in part on securing private grants to ensure long-term stability.

E-SMOKES: A ban on selling electronic cigarettes to children won overwhelming support from

lawmakers.

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