

# Otter finds fig leaves in highway poll

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter says he has to poll his constituents before he commences with another attempt to replenish the transportation account.

Why?

What could a poll tell Otter about highway funding that seven years at the helm of state government has not taught him already?

That's not to say the James A. and Louise McClure Center for Public Policy at the University of Idaho is wasting its time.

Surveying 1,200 Idahoans next month about transportation helps fill a vacuum left by Boise State University discontinuing its yearly taking of the public policy pulse.

Just the same, Otter already knows:

- It's been nearly 18 years since then-Gov. Phil Batt persuaded lawmakers to boost Idaho's fuel tax three pennies to 25 cents a gallon. Since then, inflation and more fuel-efficient cars have whittled away its purchasing power.
- Otter's own task force surveyed the need in 2010-11 and found Idaho's fuel taxes and vehicle registration fees fell \$262 million short of keeping up with yearly highway and bridge maintenance needs - plus another \$281 million shy of providing the transportation improvements Idaho's economy demands.
- People don't like taxes. Members of his own party handed him a humiliating defeat in 2009 when GOP lawmakers turned thumbs down on a \$175 million transportation package.
- Underlying road and bridge structures are deteriorating but patches and repairs are lulling the public into a false sense of security.
- The motoring public is deeply skeptical about being gouged to benefit the politically influential trucking industry. With good reason. The last cost allocation study, conducted by Battelle, found drivers of passenger cars and pickup trucks are overcharged 26 percent while the operators of semi-trucks are undercharged 27 percent.

By another measure, passenger car and pickup truck drivers pay nearly 70 cents of every dollar that goes into the state highway fund, even though nearly 700,000 interstate truck drivers cause thousands of times greater wear and tear on roads and bridges.

At the same time, servicing the needs of larger rigs is more expensive.

Otter's unwillingness to address that inequity in 2009 was a big reason he lost.

- Even last session, fully cognizant that Otter and lawmakers would be facing election in 2014, momentum toward taking some action - if only to begin discussions in January - began to mount. Earlier this year, Senate Transportation Committee Chairman Bert Brackett, R- Rogerson, introduced a package of highway funding bills intended to get the talks moving. Since then, the Associated General Contractors of Idaho - headed by Otter's former budget chief, Wayne Hammon - as well as the Association of Idaho Highway Districts and AAA of Idaho have taken some steps aimed at moving the process forward in 2014.

That was then.

This is now.

By resorting to the fiction he must wait for the McClure Center poll, Otter has derailed all of that. Not that anyone could accuse Otter of being coy. Speaking to Hammon's group Friday, Otter blatantly joked: "gettin' me re-elected" is "Idaho's greatest challenge for 2014."

There's a sense of deja vu here. In 2010, Otter skirted transportation by calling for his task force to review the matter - which waited to release its report until after the election.

Safely re-elected to a second term, Otter coasted on the transportation question.

Now we're approaching a third term.

What makes you think this governor will act any differently? - M.T.