

Otter unruffled by gay rights furor

Governor: Businesses more interested in Idaho's tax policy than political stances

William L. Spence/Lewiston Tribune

BOISE - Public policy in Idaho isn't likely to be swayed by negative media coverage of the state's gay rights disputes, Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter said Tuesday.

Speaking to reporters at an Idaho Press Club event, Otter rejected the notion that the Legislature's refusal to explicitly prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation could have a negative effect on efforts to attract new businesses.

"I can't point to one company I've visited with that has suggested that was a problem," he said. "I don't know that companies look to the political activity - they don't say, 'You're a red state, and that's why I've come here.' They look to public policy and tax policy, and they look at predictability."

Otter's comments came a week after 44 gay rights activists were arrested for blocking access to the Senate chambers. Hundreds of people also visited the Statehouse last week to protest Boise Rep. Lynn Luker's religious freedom bill, which they said sanctions religious bigotry.

National newspapers carried stories about both events, but Otter said that won't affect his view of what's appropriate public policy.

"The national media bashing Idaho because we seem to be a pretty good target for their dissatisfaction, that's not going to bother me very much," he said. "I believe in the sovereignty of Idaho, not only relative to the federal government, but relative to the national media."

He recalled a time years ago, after he first became lieutenant governor, when organizations were calling for a boycott of Idaho potatoes and other products because the Legislature approved a strict anti-abortion bill.

"I took a resolution to my first lieutenant governor's national conference condemning the boycotts, (saying) what happens in our state is our responsibility and our business," Otter said. "I couldn't even get it introduced. One guy from Guam seconded it, but the resolutions committee threw it out. I packed my bags and came home and never went to another lieutenant governor's conference again."

Asked what he'd say to a gay or lesbian couple who were thinking of moving to Idaho, Otter said he would tell them it's a great state with great employers.

"Good luck and best wishes," he said.

The governor touched on a number of other topics during the hourlong event, including the guns-on-campus bill and his reaction to recent calls for increased transportation funding.

In a break from his normal practice of not commenting on pending legislation, Otter said he supports the guns-on-campus bill, which comes before the Senate State Affairs Committee for a public hearing this morning.

"I am an advocate, and always have been, of the Second Amendment," he said. "I don't think people lose their right to the Second Amendment or the First Amendment when they walk onto a college campus."

The measure exempts retired law enforcement personnel from college and university firearm regulations. People who have an enhanced concealed carry permit are also exempt. However, the bill allows colleges and universities to prohibit all firearms in dorms, residence halls and entertainment venues that seat more than 1,000 people.

Otter also indicated he's "willing to listen" if lawmakers want to raise more money for transportation infrastructure improvements.

The Idaho Trucking Association introduced legislation last week calling for a 24 percent increase in the fuel tax. The measure would increase the tax from 25 cents per gallon to 31 cents over three years, generating about \$53 million per year in additional revenue by 2016.

Otter admitted he was embarrassed that the industry essentially had to volunteer to tax itself in an effort to spark some action on this issue.

"Quite frankly, yes. That's why I've been encouraging them to step forward," he said.

Although he continues to advocate a wait-and-see approach - saying he doesn't want to move forward until the results of a public opinion poll are available - he said he's open to alternatives.

"If the Legislature has a different idea and want to move faster, I'm willing to listen," Otter said. "But I think it's important that, when we do put a (funding) package together, there's a certain level of understanding and certainty that it's going to pass."

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