

# Bedke delivers blunt talk when Otter won't

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

Ask Idaho House Speaker Scott Bedke, R-Oakley, a straightforward question and you'll get a straightforward answer.

Case in point: What are the odds, a reporter recently asked Bedke, of the state following through on Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's pledge to boost school spending by more than \$350 million? That figure - which includes restoring about \$82.5 million in school operation cuts and then boosting teacher pay - stems from the governor's own education improvement task force. Otter says it's going to take time - maybe four or five years - but he'll get it done.

Or will he?

Owing to excessively deep spending cuts and a recovering economy, Otter has enough surplus to make a first-year down payment. But even here, he chose not to proceed.

His proposed budget adds a total increase of 2.1 percent to schools, leaving \$133 million either unspent or earmarked for additional tax reduction. The Legislature's budget committee has exceeded Otter's plan, adding \$66.2 million in general funds for public schools next year, compared to Otter's proposed \$37.5 million.

That's only the first year. In four or five years, inflation and enrollment growth will take the cost well beyond \$350 million. There's nothing on the horizon to suggest Idaho's economy will produce the kinds of budget windfalls year after year that will allow the state to maintain its other programs and continue to funnel this kind of cash into public education.

So how is the governor going to pull this off? Where is his blueprint?

He hasn't said.

But the math is clear enough. Because they sliced taxes by more than \$450 million in the past decade, Republicans diluted public school spending. Even if lawmakers followed former chief economist Mike Ferguson's alternative budget and plowed the money Otter would otherwise save or use for tax reductions into school, it would barely begin to reverse a 15-year trend that saw the share of Idaho's personal income devoted to schools fall 25 percent.

Lawmakers can't restore public school budgets without reversing the tax cuts. Instead, they are continuing to flirt with giving away even more tax goodies.

House Majority Leader Mike Moyle, R-Star, wants to lower income tax rates by about \$125 million a year. House Republicans cheered him on Monday.

Commerce Director Jeff Sayer has it in mind to give businesses a refundable tax credit worth about 30 percent of their income tax bill, 30 percent of their sales tax costs and 30 percent of the income tax withheld from their new employees. Nobody knows what that might cost.

And Senate tax committee chairman Jeff Siddoway, R-Terreton, thinks last year's compromise on reducing the property tax businesses pay on equipment was too tepid. Repeal the entire tax and the state treasury could lose another \$120 million.

So in light of all that, Bedke was asked, what are the odds that school reform will proceed?

Not much, he said.

"I'm going to call them 'pie in the sky' type numbers," he said last week. "Certainly it's where we'd like to be, but it has to be tempered by our ability to afford it without major changes in our tax structure."

Major changes as in tax increases are out.

As the Tribune's William L. Spence put it, when Bedke was asked bluntly whether the \$350 million will ever get funded, the speaker said: "When we have this conversation in 15 years, we'll know that."

That's stripping the bark off Otter's pledge.

You'd think any governor worth his word would protest such a thing.

Yet it's been more than a week since Bedke spilled the beans. Why has Otter said nothing about it? - M.T.