

# In Idaho, higher office brings higher pay

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

Let's be honest: Lowballing the pay for Idaho's elected offices carries a risk. The lower the salary, the less attractive the job, the fewer your choices.

Only people who can afford to work at that level - financially independents and retirees - will run. That's already a problem in Idaho's geriatric Legislature.

But at the top of the political food chain?

Not so much.

Six people want to be governor.

Five are running for secretary of state - including one, state Rep. Lawrence (Boss) Denney, who hasn't been shy about courting the job largely because of its generous salary and pension benefits.

Five are pursuing superintendent of public instruction.

Why wouldn't they?

Rain or shine, famine or plenty, recession or boom, these jobs have posted one pay boost after another:

- Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's \$119,000 salary is better than Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber's \$93,000, but quite a bit less than Washington Gov. Jay Inlee's \$166,000.

If lawmakers have their way, Otter - or the person elected in his place - will be making \$131,254 in four years.

- Lt. Gov. Brad Little's part-time job pays him \$35,700 - up 31.1 percent since 1999. Lawmakers think the job ought to pay nearly 29 percent more - up to \$45,973 - by 2018.
- The secretary of state, superintendent of public instruction, treasurer and controller earn the same - \$101,500. Whoever holds those jobs for the next four years can expect a 10.3 percent boost to \$111,650.
- Now paid \$107,100, the attorney general's salary would be pegged to that of a district judge, \$124,000 - a 16 percent boost.

Those pay raises are in a bill that cleared the Senate 30-5 and is awaiting action in the House. Among those voting no was Sen. Dan Schmidt, D-Moscow.

Paying a competitive salary is a philosophy that does not extend to the 25,000

Idahoans who actually do the work of state government. This year alone, legislators offered them a 1 percent permanent increase and a 1 percent bonus.

That's better than Otter, who wanted to give them nothing.

Keep in mind, workers went three years with no raises at all during the Great Recession. Hence, the average state employee is now earning about 6 percent less, after inflation, than he was a decade ago.

About 20 percent of them make less than \$20,000. Less than half earn more than \$40,000 a year.

More than 90 percent of them could earn more doing the same work somewhere else. And when the Office of Performance Evaluations asked them, 25 percent said they planned to leave state employment within the next two years.

Given that the largest share of state workers is nearing retirement age, paying people less than they're worth could become a problem.

But low pay isn't limited to state employees.

Look at your own paychecks.

Odds are you've lost ground, too. In the past five years, Idaho's average wage fell 2.7 percent behind inflation. Idaho is among 18 states where that happened and only four states saw wages hit harder.

During the recession, no state got hammered more. Idaho fell faster and deeper than anywhere else. The gap between

Idahoans' earnings and the national average expanded by almost a third - the equivalent of \$2,248 for every man, woman and child in this state.

Idaho is bouncing along the bottom. In terms of per capita earnings, it's ranked 50th out of 50 states and the District of Columbia. Only Mississippi's incomes are less and even that state has been gaining on Idaho.

That's happened despite one GOP assurance after another that if we just cut taxes on the wealthy while making sacrifices in the public schools, prosperity would be just around the corner.

All of which begs the question: Why would political elites treat themselves so astonishingly better than their subordinates and their own constituents?

Here's one guess: They're no longer afraid of us.- M.T.