

Gamble your future on Idaho - if you dare

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

To any and all doctors, engineers, professional people and high-tech experts: Please consider coming to Idaho. Our economy is drowning in minimum-wage service-sector jobs. Help us diversify.

Of course, we can't promise you'd make as much money here. Last time anyone looked, 14,600 people in fields such as optometry and computer hardware engineering earned less in Idaho than anywhere else. Another 47,000 people - including special education teachers and computer network support specialists - were on the second-lowest rung of their occupations in the country. And there were 242,000 people working at jobs who could earn more simply by moving to one of 40 other states.

Even if you make a good deal going in - and our income tax collectors certainly hope you do - there's no guarantee you won't lose ground over time.

When the Idaho Falls Post Register's Bryan Clark checked into it, he found Idaho's incomes stagnated the last 15 years. At the turn of the century, Idaho's per capita gross domestic product was \$35,158. It has grown \$217 (in constant dollars) since that time.

You have to travel far and wide to find any place worse. Only Mississippi's per capita GDP is lower. And only five states actually lost ground, including Nevada, where the housing boom went bust. Elsewhere in the West:

- Wyoming - up 35 percent to \$67,857.
- Oregon - up 39 percent to \$53,750.
- Montana - up 22 percent to \$39,251.
- Utah - up nearly 17 percent to \$45,165.
- Washington - up 8 percent to \$54,654.

"I don't have a good answer to understand why we're not seeing wages go up," Idaho State University professor of economics C. Scott Benson told Clark. "Wages seem to be growing more rapidly in surrounding states than they are in the state of Idaho."

We used to be able to shrug off this kind of news by assuring ourselves it costs less to live here. Turns out if you live in Idaho, you spend \$14,889, or about 43.2 percent of your income, just buying the basics - food, gas, housing and health care. The national average is 37.5 percent.

Only people living in six other states, such as Hawaii, pay more of their incomes for the necessities of life.

"People talk about the purchasing power and the lower cost of living in Idaho," Phil Watson, an associate professor of economics at the University of Idaho, told Rebecca Boone of The

Associated Press. "We've found that the cost of living is slightly lower, but not nearly enough to make up for the lower personal income."

Sure, we can offer you lower tax rates. Idaho ranks dead last in the West for its tax burden. But to produce that lower tax burden, Idaho's elected leadership has been busy strip-mining education.

That's one reason Idaho now is dead last among the states and the District of Columbia in the amount of money it devotes to each child's education.

Meanwhile, the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities says Idaho's cuts to higher education are the sixth-deepest in the country and the subsequent boost in tuition was among the nation's highest.

Nor is that likely to change. In spite of warnings from economists and their own legislative watchdog agency that these policies are undermining the state's infrastructure and overall competitiveness, state lawmakers can't wean themselves from tax cut mania.

Even if you're willing to gamble your own personal and professional fortune on the Gem State, there's the question of your children. They may thrive in Idaho's underfunded schools. They may even go on to college and graduate. But in a state where one in four young adults has a four-year degree, they'll be the exception to the rule.

Which means they can stay here and tread water with the rest of us - or seek prosperity in another state. In other words, the best outcome would be for them to wind up just where they are now.

So you're not coming to Idaho after all?

Was it something we did? - M.T.