

Otter's economic report buried his losing score

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's latest snapshot on Idaho's economy reads like an account of a football game.

The sky was blue.

The temperature was pleasant.

The crowd was brimming with enthusiasm.

The hometown team scored a touchdown.

Located in the fourth paragraph was the score - with the visiting team winning the game.

Otter's Labor Department highlighted how Census data shows an uptick in incomes - median household incomes were up 2.8 percent vs. a 1.7 percent national average.

Poverty rates also fell about 0.3 percent to 15.6 percent.

All to the good - but Otter's administration buried the real news:

- At \$27,932, Idaho's individual median income is dead last among the 50 states and the District of Columbia. By contrast, Washington's individual median income is \$36,861 - putting it at 10th.
- Idaho women earned a median income of \$21,908, again dead last. In 2006, they were ranked 47th in the country.
- For Idaho men, a median income of \$33,623 was ranked 48th. Eight years ago, Idaho men came in 45th.

Dig into the Census and federal Bureau of Labor Statistics reports and you'll also discover:

- Higher education is no shield against the compression in Idaho wages. Among workers with a college degree, Idahoans' median income ranks 49th - down seven notches since 2006.
- The share of Idaho jobs that offer part-time work is up to 23.3 percent - vs. the national average of 18.8 percent. Eight years ago, 19.1 percent of Idaho's job base was part time. Only three states - Nevada, Colorado and Arizona - saw part-time work expand by a greater amount.
- With 7.1 percent of its workers - or about 29,000 - earning minimum wage, Idaho is second only to Tennessee, where the minimum wage rate is 7.4 percent. Nationally, 4.3 percent of workers earn the minimum.
- Per capita income in the Gem State comes in at 50th. Mississippi remains in last place - although it is gaining on Idaho.

- At the same time, the number of jobs that will keep Idahoans above water - barely - continues to shrink. Known as the Lower Living Standard Income Level, it's the amount a person would have to earn in order to get by without charity or public assistance.

It's a subsistence - not a living - income.

For a household of four, that comes to \$42,378.

Just three of every 10 Idaho jobs provide enough income to provide self-sufficiency.

Eight years ago, it was four of every 10 Idaho jobs.

Republicans can blame Barack Obama for soaring deficits and a stagnant national economy.

Democrats can accuse George W. Bush of souring the economy with two unfunded wars and a banking crisis.

But while the nation was sinking, Idaho plummeted into a vicious cycle of low-skilled workers attracting low-wage jobs while highly educated people left the state. Bob Lokken, CEO of WhiteCloud Analytics, dubbed that scenario a "death spiral."

Aiding and abetting that predicament has been eight years of Otter's pattern of raiding public school and higher education budgets in order to cut taxes - while trumpeting every new call center as an economic godsend.

In six weeks, Idaho voters will decide whether to hand him a third term or replace Otter with Democratic challenger A.J. Balukoff.

So you can see why Otter might want to bury the score.- M.T.