

Third-term blahs taking their toll on Otter?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter Monday closed his ninth State of the State address by urging the 105 lawmakers assembled to "Think big. Be bold. Act decisively."

Too bad Otter didn't follow his own advice.

Oh sure, the governor opened the legislative session with an eye-popping \$101.2 million boost for public school funding - a down payment on his multi-year package to improve teacher pay by \$200 million.

Only by ignoring inflation and enrollment increases can he claim to have replenished the spending cuts he imposed since the recession hit. Otherwise, he's still short by an estimated \$60 million.

You also have to allow Otter credit for counting money already being spent on the troubled Idaho Education Network and teacher professional development as an increase.

So Otter's plan will not improve the facts of life for one-third of Idaho's school districts operating four days a week.

Otter's budget will not do much to lower Idaho's reliance on property taxes to keep the lights on.

It locks in place the deficits created when Otter's predecessor, now U.S. Sen. Jim Risch, pushed his 2006 tax shift package.

To say nothing of colleges and universities.

Come to think of it, Otter did just that.

To do otherwise, Otter would have conceded he's squeezing Idaho's institutions of higher learning to free up cash for his other priorities.

Colleges and universities will settle for \$7.9 million more, a 3 percent boost in a state budget that is rising 5.2 percent.

Otter's budget would leave Idaho's four-year schools more than \$26 million behind where they stood six years ago.

Then there's the governor's time bomb - a five-year effort to lower Idaho's top income tax rate from 7.4 percent to 6.9 percent.

The price tag starts at a modest \$18 million. Over time, however, the Idaho Statesman's Zack Kyle says it spreads to \$108.1 million - in today's dollars. How does that not eventually choke off money needed for future education improvements?

Otter also gave his allies at the Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry his blessing to seek repeal of an estimated \$120 million personal property tax big corporations pay on equipment. He didn't say how the state would cover the costs.

And for the sixth time since lawmakers humiliated him by rejecting his package of fuel tax and registration fee increases, Otter has left it to them to come up with a way to help a transportation system running \$262 million short every year of meeting its maintenance needs.

To his credit, he promised to veto a scheme backed by House Transportation Committee Chairman Joe Palmer, R-Meridian, to pull sales tax dollars meant for schools into highway budgets.

Does this governor expect ordinary lawmakers to buck the no-new-taxes mantra and then swoop in to claim credit if they do?

Otter also took a pass on whether to accept Obamacare's offer to extend Medicaid coverage to an estimated 80,000 low-income Idahoans - at little or no cost to the state. Given how toxic the issue is within the GOP, asking lawmakers to at least give his Medicaid working group a hearing was about all you could expect.

But a political gesture is small comfort to taxpayers, who will lose \$90 million, health care consumers, whose insurance will be squeezed for \$492 million, and more than 400 Idahoans, who may not live to hear Otter's 10th State of the State address.

Given Idaho's recovering economy and Otter's rising political fortunes, the governor might have stretched beyond this modest agenda. Has Otter already developed a case of the third-term

blahs? - M.T.