

Time's up, Idaho. No more excuses or delays

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

No matter the question, the answer coming from Idaho's Capitol was always the same:

Give us a little time.

With the economy in the doldrums, Idaho's struggling schools will have to do with less.

Wait.

Gas costs too much and people are out of work. The state's crumbling highway and bridge network will just have to make do.

We'll have to put that off awhile.

With the Idaho Republican Party so divided, nobody can afford to alienate the base.

So hang on a little longer.

Well, the economy seems to be on the mend. State revenues are running ahead of forecasts. Even the price of fuel is slipping below \$2 a gallon.

And the war for the heart and soul of the Idaho GOP is over. Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's team won. The insurrectionists lost.

So ends six years of procrastination and paralysis by ideology. As Idaho's 2015 Legislature convenes today, its agenda is remarkably focused on business left unfinished:

- Education - Six years after the recession struck, Idaho schools have yet to recover from budget cuts. About a third of Idaho's school districts operate on four-day weeks. And nearly all of them now rely on local property taxes to keep the lights on.

Simply restoring the \$45 million lost since the recession would be disingenuous. The state may be \$162 million short of matching what it devoted toward each student's education on the eve of the recession - and Idaho's school spending was hardly robust even then.

And where's the concern for higher education? No program got hit more harshly during the recession. Tuition skyrocketed as a result, putting the cost of a college education beyond the reach of many Idaho families.

- Transportation - It's been 19 years since Idaho last mustered the will to raise fuel taxes. Six years since lawmakers rebuffed Otter's last attempt to raise more money. Five years since a task force concluded that every year Idaho was falling \$262 million short of

meeting its maintenance needs, not to mention another \$281 million behind on improvements. And about a year since two separate polls - one from AAA of Idaho, the other from The James A. and Louise McClure Center for Public Policy at the University of Idaho - have shown Idahoans are mature enough to accept higher fees to preserve their transportation network.

Of course, they expect lawmakers to make long-haul truckers pay their fair share.

- Health care - What could explain Idaho's reluctance to accept the federal government's offer to provide expanded Medicaid coverage for about 80,000 low-income adults?

That doesn't mean they go without treatment when injured or ill.

Through state and local programs, this care costs Idaho taxpayers \$90 million.

Health care consumers who have insurance cover another \$492 million in cost-shifting.

There's reason to think without this change, Idaho will lose 450 of its citizens to premature death every year.

So, by all means pass a hybrid if steering federal Medicaid dollars into private insurance policies is what it takes to relieve human misery while giving Idaho taxpayers a break.

- Human rights - Is Idaho going to endure a ninth year without extending state Human Rights Act protection to gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people? Will it remain silent when confronted with legal discrimination on the job, housing and public accommodations on the basis of "sexual orientation and gender identity"? Will it continue relying on a growing network of city leaders who are passing anti-discrimination ordinances because the state refuses to act?

To merely hold a hearing - as legislative leaders now promise - only to defeat it or amend it to death would be a cynical exercise.

What happens in the next three months will tell you whether Idaho's dominant political party has regained its capacity to govern.