

GOP feuds threaten to drive state's road repairs into a ditch

William Spence/Lewiston BOISE - In case you missed it, last week was the annual Joe Cocker performance at the Statehouse, when U.S. Sens. Mike Crapo and Jim Risch come in and serenade lawmakers with a tag-team rendition of "You Are So Beautiful."

The senators never actually break into song, but they do heap praise on the Idaho Legislature. They point out how screwed up Congress is and how lovely it is in the Gem State, where budgets are balanced, government overreach is limited and devotion to states' rights is steadfast.

It's a favorite tune around here. Nothing pumps this crowd up more than hearing how much better and wiser they are than those idiots back East.

This may be a case, though, of absence making the heart grow fonder. Unbeknownst to Crapo and Risch, the blush is off the rose: The clear divide between Congress and the Legislature is beginning to blur.

Certainly Idaho remains far superior to the U.S. Senate, which last year sat immobilized while party leaders schemed and connived for political advantage. Nor have things reached the level of the U.S. House, where hundreds of lawmakers are sidelined while critical deals get negotiated by the privileged few. Indeed, one reason U.S. Rep. Raul Labrador ran for majority leader was to help fellow caucus members feel more involved - exactly the way he felt when he served in the Idaho Legislature.

But that warm embrace Labrador remembers is turning into a cold shoulder.

There are divisions here, internal factions. Because of lingering resentments and intra-party feuds, being sidelined is increasingly a possibility; more to the point, progress on key issues may depend on the factions aligning.

House Republican leaders, for example, have made it clear they don't want to rely on Democratic votes to solve Idaho's transportation funding shortfall.

They don't just want a majority solution - one that gets 36 of the 70 House votes. They don't even want a "majority majority" solution - one that captures more than half the 56 available Republican votes.

No, they're looking for a supermajority solution. They want at least 36 Republican votes, or 64 percent of the caucus; whether any Democrats sign on is a moot point.

"I want as many votes as possible, (but) I'd really like to have a majority of our caucus," said House Transportation Committee Chairman Joe Palmer, R-Meridian. "We've seen a lot of hard feelings here the last few years. I'd prefer not to add to that."

Read that quote again. What Palmer's alluding to is the 2013 health insurance exchange fight, which split Republicans and led to last year's divisive party primary and disastrous state convention.

The real message is that the desire for a "Republican only" solution isn't driven by a desire to grab all the credit themselves.

Rather, it's a defensive move designed to keep any one Republican faction from gaining an advantage over another, from gathering ammunition for the next primary battle. It's a perfect example of "keep your friends close and enemies closer."

Fair warning: Not every legislator would agree with this interpretation.

Several, for example, say the effort to address transportation funding has been as open as any they've seen, with ideas solicited from all comers.

"It's not a question of anyone being 'cut out,'" said Rep. Vito Barbieri, R-Dalton Gardens. "It's a question of momentum: Can the conservatives who believe (the funding shortfall) can be addressed without raising taxes generate enough momentum to have their perspective heard?"

It's entirely appropriate for parties to seek that internal momentum before putting their ideas on the table. The real issue is what they do when a clear caucus consensus can't be found: Will they move forward anyway? Will they allow the greater body to weigh in?

Idaho Republicans have already answered this with regard to Medicaid expansion. Rather than rely on Democratic votes to pass legislation, they've chosen to do nothing. They've stayed on defense, at the expense of those who would benefit from access to health care.

Is transportation funding another lockstep issue? The test will be what happens if - or when, as appears likely - House leaders have to choose between stalling out or advancing an option that requires Democratic support to prevail. Will they turn transportation into a partisan issue?

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," said House Speaker Scott Bedke, R-Oakley.

Senate Minority Leader Michelle Stennett, D-Ketchum, said her first reaction upon hearing of the Republican-only requirement was "How sad."

"The speaker has been pretty open about this bar being in place," she said. "The unfortunate part is I'm not sure he's going to succeed in putting a meaningful option out there. I think we (Democrats) could be part of providing some very good policy for Idaho."

And that, ultimately, is what's at stake in the Republican intra-party feuding. To the extent they can't find a way to respect their internal differences, can't resist eating their own, it undermines the sense of mission here, the shared desire of 105 lawmakers to improve the lives of their fellow citizens - the very characteristic that truly makes the Idaho Legislature such a beautiful place.

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