

How to lose a highway bill in three easy steps

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

When lawmakers convened on Jan. 12, it sure looked like they were prepared to finally do something about Idaho's crumbling highways and bridges.

Not since 1996 had any governor or Legislature raised Idaho's fuel tax. And not since the defeat of his 2009 transportation package had Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter even broached the topic.

A 2010 task force headed by Lt. Gov. Brad Little had established the state was falling short of meeting maintenance needs by \$262 million a year - to say nothing of the \$280 million a year buildup in needed construction, safety enhancement and improvements.

Transportation Director Brian Ness had won over legislative skeptics by squeezing his budget free of wasteful spending.

The economy had cooperated by producing some of the cheapest gasoline in years. Consumers may not have even noticed a nickel or dime boost in Idaho fuel taxes.

Even the political calendar was friendly. Any lawmaker who voted to raise transportation fees would not face the voters until 2016.

Yet, 11 weeks have passed by with little to show for it.

House leadership's plan to boost fuel taxes and vehicle registration assessments went down in flames Friday before the House Transportation Committee.

The chairman of that panel, state Rep. Joe Palmer, R-Meridian, has a competing bill that would gradually shift money from the general fund that supports schools, higher education, public health and government services to highways.

A coalition of educators, administrators and school board members warned lawmakers against implementing Palmer's idea because it would choke off money needed to improve teacher pay during the next five years.

By Wednesday, House members were scrambling to pass piecemeal measures. One would raise a few million bucks by shifting the Idaho State Police budget from fuel-tax supported highway accounts to the general fund. Another would raise a few million dollars more by manipulating the registration fees.

And finally, House Majority Leader Mike Moyle, R-Star, revised his plan to raise the fuel tax by 7 cents - which is certain to alienate those on the right - while flattening income tax rates - which is bound to generate sparks from the left.

So here's how you lose a transportation bill in three easy steps.

Start by electing a bunch of political ostriches. Until there's a crisis - a bridge collapses or a highway fails - no one is going to pull his head out of the sand.

That's especially true for any lawmaker who is more afraid of facing anti-tax zealots in the 2016 GOP primary than putting up with rutted highways, aging bridges and potholes.

Next, rely on a governor who is absent without leave. When it came to passing his budget or the teacher pay program, Otter had a proposal, a message and a staff that was engaged.

On highway funding, Otter offered no battle plan - other than to warn lawmakers against draining the general fund.

His staff wasn't visible. Neither was he. Otter's predecessors may have campaigned around the state for a transportation package. At minimum, they would have held press conferences reaffirming the threat to veto any raids on the general fund.

Such passivity on the part of the chief executive is the equivalent of going to war without bullets.

Finally, follow the Bedke rule.

House Speaker Scott Bedke, R-Oakley, spent a lot of political capital passing the 2013 Health Insurance Exchange when most of his caucus opposed it. He was reticent about repeating that gambit.

But the idea of freezing out House Democrats by rounding up 36 Republican votes for any transportation bill - as Bedke confidently suggested before the Idaho Association of Counties in early February - is looking implausible as April approaches.

That's not to say Bedke, Otter and legislators can't pull off some kind of 11th-hour miracle before they go home. But they call them 11th-hour miracles for a reason. - M.T.