

# Time runs short to redeem this bleak session

William L. Spence/Lewiston Tribune

BOISE - Seen through binoculars, the hawk looked both nervous and outraged.

It was perched in the bare, upper branches of a cottonwood at the Fort Boise Wildlife Management Area. A half-dozen blackbirds settled nearby, staring at it. Waiting.

As I watched, more blackbirds arrived, then more, and even more. It was like the equivalent of Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds." They covered all the branches in the tree and spilled over to a neighboring tree.

Like all hawks, this one was a master at expressing disdain. It glared at the little rat birds, then it turned its back on them, pretending they weren't there.

That's when it noticed me coming down the path, getting closer and closer. I was too big to ignore, which made it nervous. Pretty soon it would have to flush - and the blackbirds would be all over it.

At that moment, seeing the hawk's hauteur turn to worry, imagining its sense of impending doom, I knew exactly - exactly - how legislative leaders must feel about the coming adjournment.

"This pig of a session is going to end soon. We've got no lipstick to disguise it - and the minute we adjourn, those damn reporters are going to descend on us, asking questions, pecking away at our pretty feathers. This is going to be so unpleasant."

The easy solution, of course, would be for them to accomplish something major. Fix a problem. Don't just pass a budget and leave town; tackle the tough issues. In some states, that's what legislators actually do.

But lawmakers here are a little more conservative, more suspicious of government action. They don't move until they reach a certain comfort level or until they're forced to.

At the Idaho Statehouse, a sense of impending doom - of problems unresolved and disaster looming - is hardly cause for panic. If anything, it's fuel for the fire. Impending doom is often the only reason anything gets done.

Examples abound this session, most notably transportation funding and teacher pay. After several years of inaction, lawmakers seem prepared to take modest steps on both fronts - though not enough to actually solve either problem. They'll flush and fly a little ways down the trail, while the problem keeps coming.

"We're better at crisis management than strategic planning," is the way House Speaker Scott Bedke described it during a recent meeting.

There are a few instances, though, of legislators working toward long-term solutions.

One of those is House Minority Leader John Rusche of Lewiston, whose multiyear efforts in the health care field have earned him the respect of senators and representatives on both sides of the aisle.

"He continually brings forward good bills to improve health care in Idaho," Sen. Marv Hagedorn, R-Meridian, said during a recent hearing. "I appreciate his efforts. It's very obvious that good ideas aren't partisan."

Another quiet journeyman is Sen. Steven Thayn, R-Emmett, whose education proposals have likely benefited thousands of Idaho school kids.

I'd rank Thayn up there with just about any conservative in the state, but he doesn't grandstand on issues like gun rights or federal overreach. Instead, he grinds away looking for creative solutions that are consistent with his political beliefs.

Last year, for example, he and Rep. (now Sen.) Grant Burgoyne, D-Boise, sponsored the "Fast Forward" legislation, which provides \$200 and \$400, respectively, to help high school juniors and seniors cover three-quarters of the cost of college-level classes.

"Dual-credit classes were being used, but they tended to exclude lower-income students who couldn't afford them," Thayn said. "This opens the door for everyone."

The Legislature budgeted \$640,000 for the program, which covered about 10,000 credit hours. Actual demand exceeded 61,000 credit hours, with almost 17,000 participants.

"I think it will do more than anything else we've done to increase the go-on rate," Thayn said.

Fast Forward might cost the state \$5 million next year, he said. Given that dual-credit classes cost \$65 per credit hour - compared to \$300 to \$350 per credit for college students - it's effectively a \$30 million scholarship program that's based, not on income or academic merit, but on student desire and willingness to work hard.

Thayn has spent years working on similar proposals that encourage kids to complete high school early. He co-sponsored legislation allowing students to challenge required classes, and created the "8-in-6" program, which lets those who complete their high school requirements early stay in school and take college classes paid for by the state.

Although some of his conservative colleagues describe this as socialism, Thayn said the efforts could benefit taxpayers.

Rather than eight years of state-supported high school and college, for example, kids could earn degrees in as little as six years - reducing the overall burden on taxpayers while simultaneously empowering students and improving their economic futures.

"It's the politics of possibilities," he said.

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