

A lesson in arm-twisting and radiator-capping

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Because Idaho's Constitution says all tax bills must begin in the House, the Senate has been sitting on its collective togas for three months, waiting for the House to pass a highway bill.

The one that finally emerged - a proposed boost in registration fees - just got "radiator-capped." In legislative parlance, that means the Senate exercises its prerogative to rewrite everything about a bill except its top.

Hence House Transportation Committee Chairman Joe Palmer's perfunctory presentation to the Senate Transportation Committee Thursday: "It's all yours."

Tuesday, the Senate followed up with its amendments, raising fuel taxes a dime a gallon phased in over four years, plus increasing registration fees \$25. Gone was any House attempt to progressively raid the general fund - which supplies education, health, public safety and general government programs - to pay for roads and bridges.

All of this follows the Senate last week dispatching the House's ambitions to merge any highway funding package with radical changes in income and sales taxes.

This is music to Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter, who is getting at least two of his three prerequisites. The Senate proceeds with a user fee and it avoids draining the general fund.

Still, at \$127 million, the measure won't come close to meeting Idaho's needs. Idaho's leaders have waited so long to do something about highway funding that the state is now \$262 million short of maintaining just what it has - let alone catching up on a backlog of safety and capacity projects estimated to cost \$280 million a year.

Short of gouging motorists, lawmakers have only one real option - getting long-haul truckers to pay their full share. According to the government contractor Battelle, Idaho undercharges truckers 27 percent, while it overcharges passenger car and pickup truck drivers 26 percent.

How much of this - if any - is the House willing to buy? Palmer's panel continues to parade measures that siphon dollars from the general fund. Nor is there any indication House Speaker Scott Bedke is willing to pass a highway bill by forging a coalition of centrist Republicans and House Democrats.

If you're a consumer, you've got to be wondering why they're hesitating. Gas prices remain more than \$1 a gallon below where they stood when Idahoans told two polls - one from AAA of Idaho, the other conducted by the James A. and Louise McClure Center for Public Policy at the University of Idaho - they could be persuaded to support a tax increase.

Any legislator who supports a highway package will have more than a year before facing the voters.

Put this off another year and nobody can be certain the economic and political windows of opportunity will remain viable in 2016.

Otter understands this best of all. In 2008, lawmakers offered him far less than he wanted - including a 3-cent-a-gallon fuel tax boost. He declined it.

With the economy in free-fall the next year, Otter got next to nothing from the 2009 legislative session. There the issue sat for the next six years.

Time is running short.

This is the week for cutting deals.

After that comes the week for politics and recriminations. - M.T.