

Moyle took aim at teacher pay plan's funding

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Among Idaho's 105 lawmakers, only eight opposed the idea of improving teacher pay.

House Majority Leader Mike Moyle, R-Star, was among the eight.

But within days, Moyle tried to dismember the teacher pay initiative.

Idaho's career ladder plan boosts teacher pay by \$125 million during the next five years. It's fairly modest. For instance, it would elevate beginning teacher salaries to \$37,000 - or about \$3,000 less than the framers of Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's education reform task force proposed. Idaho's teacher pay is ranked 49th in the nation and there's little reason to think the state will make up much ground.

Even at that, it's not clear if there's money to pay for it. It assumes Idaho's economy will produce five years of abundant tax revenues. Left unsaid is whether Idaho's pent-up demands - such as the state's struggling colleges and universities or a public workforce whose paychecks are 20 percent short - will get addressed. Underlining all of this is a belief that an economic expansion now in its 73rd month will continue uninterrupted for another five years or so.

Here's how Moyle - with House Speaker Scott Bedke's support - planned to do away with it. He would yank \$70 million a year out of the general fund that supports schools, higher education, public safety, health and general government programs.

No money.

No career ladder.

There's more.

Moyle wanted to do it all by robbing the poor to help the rich.

His plan put Idaho on the path toward a flat income tax rate of 6.7 percent.

That's great if you're used to paying Idaho's top rate of 7.4 percent.

Otherwise, Moyle was sending you a higher tax bill.

Next, he eliminated both the \$100 per person grocery sales tax credit and took the sales tax off groceries - a move that probably would have hurt low-income families while benefiting anyone who spends more money on food.

Finally, he sought to increase Idaho's fuel tax by 7 cents.

The Idaho Center for Fiscal Policy says this meant a tax increase for any household earning less than \$93,800. On the other hand, if you're pulling in more than \$172,000, Moyle's plan would have lowered your tax bill by an estimated \$644 or more.

The Associated Taxpayers of

Idaho found a two-income family making \$55,949 would have paid \$228 more in taxes, some of which would have gone to the family earning \$73,464, whose taxes would drop \$31.

For added spice, Moyle threw a slap at Otter. In his Jan. 12 State of the State address, the governor warned lawmakers not to fund highway improvements by draining the general fund.

But that's precisely what Moyle proposed - trading \$65 million in new transportation taxes for cuts in revenues for the general fund.

Throw in Moyle's deviousness. In the final days of the legislative session, there's no time to analyze, critique and debate. nce again - as was the case when then-Gov. Jim Risch called lawmakers into a one-day special session in the dog days of 2006 - the public's voice was being shut out of the process.

All to the good, said Moyle's fellow House Republicans. With three exceptions, they got in line and the measure sailed through the House Monday, 53-17.

What followed was a series of confusing signals from the Senate.

Leadership bypassed Senate tax committee Chairman Jeff Siddoway, R-Terreton. Siddoway declared at the legislative session's onset he would bury any tax bill that got in the way of raising teacher salaries.

"Our local schools are dying," Siddoway told the Tribune's William L. Spence in January. "I don't know how else to put it."

Instead, the bill went to the Transportation Committee, which Tuesday sent the measure to the full Senate floor.

Then - by unanimous consent - the 35-member chamber dealt Moyle's scheme a death blow.

"It appears that the majority of the Idaho Senate is not inclined to or will support the legislation," said Senate Majority Leader Bart Davis, R-Idaho Falls.

All of which had the desired effect of eliminating Moyle's scheme with dispatch.

But it felt like a close call.

Too close. - M.T.

