

Idaho lawmakers spend nearly \$300,000 in travel expenses

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Idaho taxpayers footed a bill of nearly \$250,000 to cover expenses for lawmakers traveling to and from Boise during the 2015 legislative session and another \$50,000 for them to travel outside the state over the past fiscal year.

The records for all 105 members of the state House and Senate were obtained by The Associated Press through a public records request.

Republican Sen. Bob Nonini from Coeur d'Alene received the most in-state travel reimbursements of any lawmaker — nearly \$8,800 between December 2014 and April 2015.

In the House, Republican Rep. Vito Barbieri — a conservative three-term legislator also from northern Idaho— racked up the highest combined in-state and out-of-state tab of \$9,689. It included a \$1,226 reimbursement for the 2014 American Legislative Exchange Council conference — a conservative think tank focused on free-market, limited government and division of powers between federal and state governments.

In a state encompassing more than 83,600 square miles that takes roughly 10 hours to drive from bottom to top, it's not difficult for lawmakers to rack up hefty expense tabs traveling home during weekends.

Yet discrepancies exist in how much it costs for a lawmaker to travel to one region of the state. During the legislative session, Barbieri flew home 12 times to Spokane, Washington, on his way home with the average cost of his plane tickets at \$439.

Republican Rep. Ron Mendive, who serves in the legislative district next to that of Barbieri, flew home 10 times with an average ticket price of \$235.

Barbieri did not return phone calls made by The Associated Press on Monday.

In the Senate, Nonini flew home 12 times and paid almost \$460 each time. He did not respond to phone calls Monday seeking comment.

Northern Idaho lacks an airport that lawmakers can fly to nonstop. So they often fly nonstop from Boise to Spokane and take a rental car to their homes in Idaho.

Lawmakers in eastern Idaho legislative districts tend to just drive the four to six hours home on the weekends.

This year's Idaho Legislature session convened on Jan. 12 and ended April 11.

Lawmakers "understand that they're supposed to travel in the most economical way," said House Speaker Scott Bedke of Oakley. "Sometimes that isn't always possible ... But the rules say they're entitled to a trip home each week."

Last year, Bedke had to tell Republican Rep. Jeff Thompson of Idaho Falls to rein in his expenses. The eastern Idaho legislator previously spent more than \$15,000 on travel in a single year. Thompson spent about \$5,100 in 2015.

Bedke added that he had broad conversations with lawmakers early in the year regarding traveling finances but didn't single out anyone in particular.

The House speaker's total tab for travel expenses was \$3,228. None of it was for covering out-of-state conferences.

Along with receiving travel reimbursements, state lawmakers earn \$16,684 each year and receive a per diem — \$129 a day for lawmakers who have to take up a second residence and \$49 a day for everyone else — when the Legislature is in session.

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