

Idaho's potentates take aim at local control

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Idahoans believe government closest to the people governs best.

But here's the message coming out of the state Capitol Dome:

Big Brother is calling.

In four weeks, lawmakers have unleashed a barrage of attempts to preempt, frustrate or eliminate any possibility that elected officials running the schools, cities and counties will even contemplate doing anything that is contrary to legislative fiat.

Consider the following:

- Now on its way to the Senate is the House-passed bill prohibiting any city, county or local agency from banning or taxing the use of plastic bags.

Nobody has enacted such a ban in Idaho, but lawmakers just want to make certain the natives don't get any ideas.

- Republican members of the House Business Committee backed a bill preempting local officials - or the voters themselves - from raising the minimum wage. Never mind that 53 percent of McCall voters last fall rejected an initiative to raise the minimum wage from the current state standard of \$7.25 an hour to \$8.75 this year and to \$10.25 next year. Lawmakers will decree it shall never happen again.
- If Sens. Jim Rice, R-Caldwell, and Mary Souza, R-Coeur d'Alene, have their way, Idaho's unpaid and non-partisan school board trustees will no longer face their own constituents in the traditional venue - elections held in May of odd-numbered years. Instead, the Rice-Souza bill will require school board members to appear on the same ballot as the Republican and Democratic candidates for president, Congress, governor and the Legislature.

Don't be surprised if school boards become more partisan.

- Sen. Chuck Winder, R-Boise, just can't seem to help himself from meddling in the contentious recall campaign against four of the five West Ada School Board members. He's behind a bill that would block any of the recall-targeted members of that board - or any other school board - from resigning and appointing replacements "of like mind."

Winder's bill contains an emergency clause. If it passes, it becomes law immediately.

- Souza and Sen. Todd Lakey, R-Nampa, have backed a bill extending the Idaho Sunshine Law's campaign finance disclosure requirements to the pockets of recall and local

elections where it still does not apply. Nothing wrong with that. But why does it have an emergency clause? Could it be that by taking effect immediately, it would apply to the May 17 West Ada School Board recall election?

- House Majority Leader Mike Moyle, R-Star, wants to place more obstacles in the way of cities and counties that choose to draw upon tax increases they deferred to take in the past. These are called foregone tax increases. Idaho caps how much cities and counties can raise taxes. If they forego taking the maximum increase in years they don't need it, local officials can resort to those dollars if they require them later on.

The fly in Moyle's ointment here is that his bill makes life more difficult for local officials who have been frugal, takes it easier on those who have not - and assumes the taxpayers won't notice the difference.

Idaho lawmakers rail against federal encroachment upon their own sovereignty while keeping a tight leash on cities, counties and schools. Only when it serves their purposes - such as dodging the state's constitutional obligation to provide adequate criminal defense for indigents - do lawmakers offer up a pretense of respect for local control.

But even for them, this is an unusually long and far-reaching list of legislative intrusion into the prerogatives of local government. What provoked it?

The people serving on Idaho's city councils, county commissions and school boards are as conservative as the people who elected them - and, by the way, who elected the potentates in Boise. Has the Idaho Legislature now decided it can't trust those voters, either?