

# Idaho's Legislature delivered on low expectations

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Look not to Charles Dickens to describe Idaho's just-adjourned legislative session.

These were neither the best of times nor the worst.

Look instead to Thomas Hobbes. This was "nasty, brutish and short."

Short? Certainly.

The session concluded just in time to observe Good Friday.

What would you call that?

Ironic?

For the 78,000 working poor Idahoans who can't afford health insurance, however, it was brutish.

Facing the moral challenge of their era, lawmakers left Boise for the fourth year unwilling extend to their citizens the Medicaid coverage now in effect in 32 states and the District of Columbia.

Neither could they agree to at least spend \$30 million - as Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter proposed - shoring up the health care system just enough to prevent at least a few more people from dying of poverty in Idaho.

Nor could they even agree to commit themselves toward acting next year.

Brutish, too, for the people living at the margins of Idaho society. Promises to end legal discrimination against Idaho's LGBT community on the job, in housing and in public accommodations turned out to be empty. Once again, there was no bill to add the words "sexual orientation and gender identity" to Idaho's human rights law.

For Idaho's homeowners, it was nasty.

No longer will their Homeowners Exemption be indexed for inflation. Now they can expect property taxes on their residences to rise an estimated \$10 million year after year - while the owners of rental, commercial and industrial properties will reap the benefit.

And the state's college students will feel the sting of another tuition increase. Lawmakers failed to replenish the higher education budgets they drained during the Great Recession. They rejected Otter's "tuition lock" plan to hold the line on costs. And by only partially funding the cost of living pay increases for faculty and staff, they shifted the rest of the burden on students.

Seeking integrity in government? Lewiston Rep. John Rusche's inspector general bill got bottled up in House Speaker Scott Bedke's Ways and Means Committee while the speaker and Senate President Pro Tem Brent Hill anted up another \$8 million to pay off contractors involved in a bogus Idaho Education Network contract described by Idaho's Supreme Court as corrupt.

Nasty?

What would you call a group of politicians who placated the anti-abortion rights crowd by outlawing fetal tissue donations, something Planned Parenthood of Idaho does not even practice, while ignoring the plight of children whose parents are allowed to neglect or abuse them on religious grounds.

Or one that insisted on force-feeding the Bible on public school students - while ignoring the obvious constitutional problems, lawsuits and legal bills this will generate?

And rather than face the wrath of the gun lobby, lawmakers enabled any adult to carry a concealed weapon without a background check, any training or any scrutiny.

Like the idea of deciding your destiny with members of your own community? Instead, you got an overbearing "we know best" attitude from Boise. No longer will voters decide if their cities or counties should ban plastic bags or even raise the minimum wage.

Yet, it could have been worse.

The efforts of tax hawks such as House Majority Leader Mike Moyle, R-Star notwithstanding, lawmakers resisted their impulse to allocate more of Idaho's scarce resources into the pockets of the well-to-do and corporations. That took some courage. This group of Republican lawmakers will face re-election after increasing transportation fees last year with no tax cut to offset it.

They also devoted a sizeable amount of money to rebuilding the state's public education system. It's less than Otter recommended and it's not enough to lift Idaho schools from their impoverished predicament. But it wasn't that long ago that these legislators were practicing political warfare against the public schools.

The state made a down payment toward delivering the competent legal defense that is every citizen's right under the U.S Constitution by pumping more resources into public defender reforms.

Anti-Muslim legislation got a hearing, but not much more - and certainly nothing like the 2015 blow-up that almost undermined the state's child support enforcement laws.

A great session?

Hardly.

Merely a good one?

Not really.

But this is Idaho.

What did you expect?