

Look at who just raised your property taxes

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

The list of Idaho lawmakers who just voted to raise your property taxes reads like a Who's Who of conservative Republicans.

Among them:

- House Majority Leader Mike Moyle, R-Star.
- Rep. Heather Scott, R-Blanchard.
- Rep. Don Cheatham, R- Post Falls.
- Rep. Ron Mendive, R-Coeur d'Alene.
- Rep. Vito Barbieri, R-Dalton Gardens.
- Rep. Brent Crane, R-Nampa.
- Rep. Tom Loertscher, R-Iona.
- Rep. Pete Nielsen, R-Mountain Home.
- Rep. Janet Trujillo, R-Idaho Falls.

They voted to cap the Homeowners Exemption that shields most owner-occupied residences from the full brunt of the property tax. At present, half the taxable value of a home worth up to \$189,400 is exempt from taxation.

The Homeowner's Exemption is pegged to inflating real estate values. So next year, the cap is expected to rise to \$200,000.

Which is where Moyle, Barbieri and 53 other House members voted to leave it. As inflation continues, the tax break for homeowners will erode. Idaho's State Tax Commission says it will amount to a \$10 million - or 2.2 percent - tax increase every year beginning in 2018.

In other words, by 2028, Idaho's homeowners will be paying \$100 million more in property taxes.

Nor does this generate one more dime for Idaho's struggling schools, counties or cities. This is a tax shift. If homeowners pay more, it means someone else - landlords, farmers, commercial businesses and industry - will pay less.

Lower-priced homes will not be affected. But the State Tax Commission says almost 44 percent of residences are priced at the exemption's cap.

Most of the pain will be clustered in eight counties where at least 45 percent of the homes already are priced at the top of the exemption's range and therefore stand exposed to a property tax hike.

They include Bonner, Kootenai, Latah, Valley, Boise, Ada, Blaine and Teton counties.

Of the 32 House members who represent those homeowners, 21 went along with it - 20 Republicans and one Democrat. State Rep. Caroline Troy, R-Genesee, voted yes.

Of the 11 who voted no, eight were Democrats - including Rep. Paulette Jordan of Plummer - and three were Republicans.

In another four counties - including Nez Perce, Idaho, Jefferson and Madison - anywhere from 30 percent to 45 percent of the homes are priced at the cap and their owners would get nailed by this change.

Of the eight lawmakers from those counties, five said yes - including Dan Rudolph, D-Lewiston, and Shannon McMillan, R-Silverton.

Three, including Reps. John Rusche, D-Lewiston, and Paul Shepherd, R-Riggins, said no.

Why are they doing this? Who knows?

It's startling how so many people could get elected to public office and remain blind to the fact that property taxes are the third rail of Idaho politics.

Did they not read last year's Associated Taxpayers of Idaho survey? It found 67 percent of Idahoans were content with the sales tax and 56 percent were OK with the income tax. But only 48 percent tolerated their property taxes.

Are they ignorant of an Idaho political landscape littered with the debris of property tax wars?

Whole chapters include the 1978, 1992 and 1996 voter insurrections to limit property taxes - not to mention the 1982 initiative that implemented a Homeowners Exemption much more sweeping than the Legislature was willing to provide.

Property tax relief was the primary issue of the 1994 gubernatorial race and it dominated the 2006 Legislature.

Was it because the issue has been dormant during the real estate bust that kept property taxes in check and allowed the Legislature's focus to drift toward corporate income and personal property tax relief?

Or was it because they rushed the bill from introduction to floor passage in eight days, not waiting for the State Tax Commission briefing.

When the tax commission delivered its findings to the Senate Local Government and Taxation Committee last week, Sen. Dan Johnson, R-Lewiston, voted against the bill. But Johnson stood apart from his Republican colleagues, who sent the measure to the full Senate for approval anyway.

Just the same, this Legislature is about to stir homeowners from their slumber.

Here's betting they'll wished they hadn't.