

House lawmakers kill arts commission budget

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BOISE, Idaho (AP) — House Democratic members, fed up with being ignored by the Idaho Republican supermajority, pulled a rare move Thursday and helped kill a modest funding proposal for the state's arts commission as a signal that the majority caucus takes for granted their votes for support.

Just eight out of the 14 Democratic lawmakers voted nay on the \$1.9 million budget proposal for the Idaho Commission on the Arts, but that was enough to spike the legislation with the help of 29 opposing Republican lawmakers. There was no debate in favor or against before the commission's budget went down on a 36-33 vote.

"We are holding them accountable," said House Minority Leader John Rusche, D-Lewiston. "They keep refusing to listen to our bills, but expect us to go along and vote in favor when they need us. Today was a statement."

Over the years, it has become common practice to see around 20 Republican nay votes —coming from almost always the more far-right leaning members opposed to increased government spending— on any given budget bill. This means Democratic lawmakers are sometimes the key to advancing legislation. Yet at the same time, Democratic lawmakers have been blocked by Republican leadership from introducing bills like a minimum wage increase or Medicaid expansion.

That frustration came to a head last week when a Republican lawmaker won approval from GOP leadership to introduce a bill designed to keep Shariah law and other foreign codes out of Idaho courts or government agencies. The bill included additional information, including pictures of a severed hand and a man about to be beheaded. The pictures were pasted in between definitions of Shariah law and accusing the Prophet Muhammad of being a pedophile.

Meanwhile, the House Democratic caucus has 11 bills that have not been allowed an introductory hearing.

"They'll entertain severed hands but not good policy from Democrats?" Rusche asked while speaking to reporters, visibly angry.

The Democrats' public opposition on Thursday is significant because it comes right before the House is expected to debate much larger appropriation proposals — most notably the public schools budget, which is the state's largest state appropriation. Yet Rusche declined to say if his caucus will play the same move on future spending proposals.

It's also unclear if their statement stuck with GOP leaders once the House adjourned for the day.

Republican Rep. Maxine Bell, co-chair of the state's powerful Joint Finance Appropriations budget-setting committee, said her panel would meet next week to set a new arts commission budget and expected very little resistance or delays to getting that passed by the estimated adjournment date of March 24.

Furthermore, House Majority Caucus Chair John Vander Woude said the Democrats were overplaying their importance and their gripes.

"We're not asking our caucus to toe the line," Vander Woude said. "If they have heartburn on a budget bill, we're not going to make them vote for it. But if we need 36 votes, we'll get it."

State budget writers allocated a 2.6 percent budget increase for the arts commission for fiscal year 2017. This included \$18,000 for state-approved pay raises for 10 employees and \$10,400 for increased benefits costs.

"This is out of the ordinary, but since it's still in the middle of the budget-setting process, I don't want to do much conjecture at this point," said Michael Faison, the commission's executive director. "We've always had bipartisan support."