

Commentary Jim Fisher

Robison was the homeowner's friend; Troy is not

Jim Fisher/Lewiston Tribune

Idaho homeowners lost a champion the other day, just as most legislators - including one of my own - are in the process of hobbling his signature achievement.

When Ken Robison of Boise died Oct. 16 at age 79, he left a series of accomplishments for which he will be remembered. A former reporter, editorial writer for the state's largest newspaper, civic activist and legislator, he was a persistent force for conservation, healthy funding for education and steering kids away from addiction. But it was his authorship of the citizen initiative that became Idaho's property tax exemption for owner-occupied homes that will stand as his premier legacy.

"The people of Idaho owe Ken a big thank-you for the property tax protection that he made available," former Idaho Gov. Cecil Andrus says of Robison. "As a legislator, he was always thinking of the little guy."

As originally written, and enacted in 1982 by 56 percent of state voters, the homeowner exemption - then called the 50-50 Initiative - exempted \$50,000 or 50 percent of a home's valuation, whichever was less, from property tax. Although that resulted in a property tax shift from homes to businesses, utilities, farms and rentals, the move was actually a correction of a longtime shift away from those properties and onto homes, initiative supporters pointed out. Because residences increase in valuation more rapidly than those others, homeowners found themselves shouldering a bigger share of the property tax burden with each passing year.

The initiative gave them relief, at least for a spell. Because it put a fixed ceiling on the exempted amount, ever-increasing valuations rendered it less beneficial as time passed. Finally, legislators raised the maximum exemption to \$75,000 in 2006, before agreeing a year later to index it to varying residential valuations.

In 2009, it reached a high of \$104,471 before the housing crash of the Great Recession sent it back downward.

By this year, it had climbed back to \$94,745, but a more right-leaning Legislature decided it was time to start letting the little guy pay a bigger share of the tax burden again.

The exemption had never been popular in some circles. An early lawsuit to nullify it was rejected by the Idaho Supreme Court in 1986. And I recall seeing even as sweet a person as the late Rep. Doc Lucas of Moscow treat Robison rudely during a legislative committee meeting in the early '80s. (I trust that once Robison was elected to the House, however, Lucas greeted his new colleague with his customary courtesy and graciousness.)

This year, the blade finally fell. Legislators in both chambers overwhelmingly passed a measure ending the exemption's indexing and setting its ceiling at \$100,000. Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter signed it into law.

Although \$100,000 might sound reasonable - this year - the average single home in several counties, including Latah County where I live, is already valued at more than \$200,000. That means those legislators who supported the law voted to raise my property tax bill starting in 2018, when the new limit is imposed, and to raise it more with each coming year.

I am not one ordinarily to complain about rising taxes. Rather, I frequently invite my public servants to tax me more, to provide for better schools, roads, parks and the like. But the increased amounts local taxing districts will extract from me under this law will not go to those good purposes, which will receive the same number of dollars as before. They will be used to enable owners of businesses, utilities, farms, rental properties and even second homes to pay less.

I object to that, with the same justification that led to passage of the original initiative. My property's valuation will rise more rapidly than that of others, and each year their share of the tax burden will grow smaller as mine grows larger.

I expect better treatment from my legislators, and from two of them - Sen. Dan Schmidt and Rep. Paulette Jordan - I got it. They opposed this assault on homeowners, as did Sen. Dan Johnson and Rep. John Rusche in District 6.

But another - Rep. Caroline Nilsson Troy - supported it.

Don't ask me why she would do that, other than that most of her fellow Republicans did, also. But then, don't ask me why the Idaho Association of Realtors would ask them to. I have long wondered whose interest, if not that of homeowners, the association is looking out for.

Nilsson Troy did make one vote easier for me this Election Day, though. Her opponent, Laurene Sorensen, says she would have joined Schmidt and Jordan in opposing the new law. When I go to the polls, I intend to vote the way Ken Robison would have.

Fisher is the former editor of the Tribune's Opinion page. His email address is cfandjf@frontier.com