

# Opportunity knocked; Otter did not answer

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

Monday marked Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter's 11th State of the State address.

If ever there was a time for Otter to deliver a legacy-defining initiative or even a thoughtful message, this was it. There were even rhetorical flourishes that suggested the man was about to meet his moment.

As he began, Otter told Idaho's assembled 105 lawmakers: "I know you share my commitment to finding Idaho-based solutions rather than waiting for our national government's dysfunction to get turned around."

A few minutes later, Otter closed by reminding them: "Voters have expressed a desire for government that works, both here in Boise and in Washington, D.C. They're tired of timid representation that seems more concerned with the next election than the next generation."

For his penultimate appearance, Otter kept up the push for year three of his five-year public education reform package. This segment contains a \$58 million boost for teacher pay and an overall 6.4 percent school budget increase.

He proposed to deliver half of the \$20 million needed to build the career and technical center Lewis-Clark State College and the Lewiston School District have proposed.

And if you ask around, you'll hear Otter's accolades among those working with the mentally ill in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho Falls and Twin Falls - where the state has launched behavior health crisis centers.

Beyond that, however, the governor's blueprint is more striking for what's missing.

Friday at a legislative preview press conference, Otter proposed to rally a higher education reform task force similar to the process that yielded his public school program. But he made no mention of the plan Monday, an odd omission when you consider he'll have to persuade lawmakers next year to commit to whatever that panel recommends five years into the future - and long after Otter has retired to private life.

Medicaid expansion? The fact that President-elect Donald Trump and the GOP-led Congress want to "repeal and replace" Obamacare does not alter the reality that 78,000 working-poor Idaho adults can't afford health insurance. Nor does it change the fact that Idaho can more than afford to make the Medicaid match to extend coverage to that group of people - a move that would save lives and tax dollars.

But the man who has so valiantly made the gap population's plight his own - Health and Welfare Director Richard Armstrong - is retiring and Otter - his protestations to the contrary - is kicking "an oversized can down the road."

Transportation? In 2009, Otter thought Idaho's underfunded highway and bridge network worthy of risking his political prestige. Two years ago, he settled for a package that even he admits falls about \$200 million short each year of meeting Idaho's maintenance needs.

Monday, Otter devoted not one paragraph, sentence or syllable to the topic.

Taxes? Even with a \$140 million surplus, there's a strong case against cutting taxes further. As Otter noted, state revenues have been sliced almost \$1 billion since he took office. Businesses will reap a \$46 million cut in the unemployment insurance taxes they pay.

"I also understand the cost of failing to invest prudently and sustainably in our future," Otter said. "So I will not entertain anything that undermines our commitment to meeting our essential state government functions. At the top of that list are our investments in improving education and career readiness in Idaho."

Talk about wrapping a veneer of vagueness around rings of ambiguities.

If you were looking for a firm veto threat, you didn't get it. Not that it would mean all that much anyway. Two years ago, Otter held the veto stamp over any plan to raid the general fund - which provides support for schools and general government - to pay for transportation. When the Legislature did just that, Otter acquiesced.

Keep in mind the timing. A year from now, the race for Idaho governor will be in high gear - with the all-important GOP primary just months away. When Otter gives his final State of the State, lawmakers will give him a polite response and then wait for his successor to speak in 2019.

This was Otter's last, best opportunity to leave his mark.

He squandered it. - M.T.