

Slogans no cure for Idaho's beat-up highways

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

It began with a long, cold and wet winter.

The pattern of snow and ice thawing and refreezing had its predictable results - potholes, frost heaves, damaged highway surfaces and even roadbeds.

Next came the melting snow, which has flooded portions of southern Idaho's interstates and inundated whole sections of areas such as the Magic Valley. The headline in Friday's Twin Falls Times-News: "Submerged."

You know what's coming next.

Idaho lawmakers may grumble, but they'll get around to fixing it.

We've been here before.

Back in 1996, it was northern Idaho's turn. During that winter, snow fell for 10 days, reaching depths of 6 feet in Moscow. Next came the thaw. Then came the rains.

The St. Joe River flooded more than 100 homes in St. Maries.

At Winchester Lake, the outlet dam almost failed.

Lapwai and Culdesac were evacuated.

Damages in Idaho were estimated at \$40 million.

President Bill Clinton came to Boise to consult with local authorities.

Gov. Phil Batt spoke to a joint legislative session asking for help.

As the Tribune's William L. Spence recalled a couple of years ago, it took Batt's legendary arm-twisting - including securing a tie-breaking senator's vote with a promise to study heavier trucks on the roads. But lawmakers eventually agreed to boost the state's fuel tax by 3 cents a gallon.

There it remained until 2015, when the Legislature grudgingly raised the gas tax by 7 cents a gallon and most registration fees by \$21. But because they refused to compel long-haul truckers to pay their full share, the package barely covered about a third of the \$262 million annual maintenance backlog.

Nor was there any serious talk about reducing that gap further.

Until last week when Rep. Clark Kauffman, R-Filer, surveyed the turmoil in his district and asked the House Transportation Committee to respond to the emergency by raising the fuel tax another 5 cents during the next three years. State and local transportation departments would share the \$49 million on a 60-40 split.

"In the last week or so, I think this bill is even more so needed," Kauffman said. "With the degradation of the roads, the washouts, the bridges we've lost, I think this is even more timely."

All Kauffman sought was a chance to plead his case before a formal legislative committee hearing. But nine of the Transportation Committee's 14 Republicans wouldn't go even so far as to introduce his bill. They're not about to even consider a tax increase.

Four Republicans joined the panel's three Democrats in voting yes. The remaining Republican on that panel, Rep. Paul Shepherd, R-Riggins, was absent.

So where does that leave us?

With a pittance of money drained from resources that otherwise would go to public education.

That's Transportation Chairman Joe Palmer's idea. He wants to take five years to wean Idaho State Police from the \$17 million the agency now receives in fuel taxes.

Since ISP has no plans to shrink, the money has to come from somewhere else - chiefly the same general fund that supports schools, higher education and public health.

That's also the same account that would shed cash through another proposed maneuver - extending the two-year "surplus eliminator." Of course, it depends on the budget yielding more money than expected for the foreseeable future.

Unstable money to respond to a concrete problem.

It's a great idea if you're looking for a political slogan - "look, we did something."

Stuck with replacing tires, struts and alignments, motorists will barely recognize the benefit. So what's changed in 20 years?

Did Idaho's politicians just become more ideological?

Or merely more timid? - M.T.