

# A changing climate?

**Randy Stapilus/Ridenbaugh Press**

Who would have guessed that the biggest turnout for an Idaho legislative hearing this year would come on the subject of climate change?

It was all the more surprising because there's no active Idaho legislation specifically on the subject this year -- nothing moving through the system.

The closest came last month when legislators voted to pull references to climate change from classroom standards in Idaho schools. At a Senate committee meeting on the subject about two dozen members of the public spoke on the standards rule, all but one in favor of retaining the references to climate change; on a party line vote, the reference was stricken. (The Senate seemed somewhat open to compromise, but the House was firm that the climate change reference must go.)

The Republican leadership and committee chairs aren't supportive of it as a legislative initiative, so it's just not a subject of much discussion.

At least, not until last Wednesday's hearing at the Statehouse.

What happened then wasn't even a hearing, exactly, not even a formal proceeding of a legislative committee. Instead, after Dell Raybould, the House Environment, Energy and Technology Committee chairman, turned down a request by Democratic Representative Ilana Rubel for a committee informational event, he agreed to allow a special meeting which was not connected to the committee, to be held in the Statehouse's auditorium. Though no supporter of her position on the issue, he personally showed and stayed through the event. Not much of the rest of the committee seems to have appeared.

So this was an event without any official standing, untied to legislation or even any committee or even any specific proposal, and without the opportunity to speak to any governing group of legislators.

Despite all that it drew, by several reporters' estimates, around 650 people, enough to fill the auditorium and cause building managers to open overflow rooms. It was the biggest crowd for any event in this year's legislative session. It was among the biggest crowds any Idaho legislative event ever has drawn.

Rubel, who hosted the meeting, was quoted as saying, "This issue is not just about rising ocean levels and polar bears -- it's about crops and jobs in Idaho. Idaho's leaders must assess the risk ahead and take steps to address it, not hide their heads in the sand."

The crowd seemed to be mostly unified in its stand, too. To judge at least from the testimony, the push was strong for at least acknowledging the fact of climate change (you won't find much of

that kind of acknowledgement in the Idaho Legislature) and the need to plan ahead for changes that may be coming.

On one hand, the presence of a large turnout hasn't proven especially persuasive to the Idaho Legislature up to now. As I wrote a few weeks back, large turnout on one side of an issue often has resulted in . . . exactly the opposite reaction from legislators. The "Add the Words" campaign, which has drawn large crowds, is just one example.

But the ability to draw such significant numbers for a single meeting does suggest some untapped political energy out there. Campaigns in legislative races, and ballot initiatives, could be accomplished with smaller numbers and force than that single meeting generated.

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