

Time for Sheriff Butch to whip out his veto

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

The people who just wrapped up Idaho's latest legislative session acted more like the irresponsible, self-indulgent politicians who linger in Sacramento than the sober, fiscal conservatives you've come to expect from Boise.

How else can you explain their abdication toward balancing the budget? Between their two final signature acts - taking the sales tax off food and drawing even more money out of the general fund for highways - these lawmakers simply spent more than the state could afford.

Sen. Chuck Winder, R-Boise, didn't even try to mince words: They left a mess for Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter to clean up.

"We're now allowing the governor to be the referee or the sheriff," Winder told the Spokesman-Review's Betsy Russell. "He's responsible for balancing the budget. I don't know exactly what he'll do."

When he takes out his dust bin, Otter will look ahead one year to the budget cycle that begins on July 1, 2018.

He knows tax revenues are expanding by about 4.8 percent - or \$168 million.

He sees the cost of everything state government does - schools, higher education, health and public safety - rising about 5.4 percent, or \$186.3 million.

He'll consider the following:

- The sales tax cut has a price tag of \$79.5 million.
- Although borrowing covers most of the \$320 million transportation bill, it also draws about \$15.2 million from ongoing general fund spending.

That puts Idaho about \$95 million in the hole for the Fiscal Year 2019 budget lawmakers will prepare a year from now.

Next Otter will start asking questions: Where will he find the money for the next installment of the public education reform package, including the career ladder for teacher pay?

Colleges and universities have been treading water, but Otter's task force is supposed to deliver a reform package in time for the 2018 session. Where's the money for that - or, for that matter, prisons and Medicaid?

Does anyone expect the Legislature to make up the difference by raising taxes on the eve of an election?

By then, the governor ought to hear his own words ringing in his ears:

"It's no surprise that we all want tax relief," Otter said in a State of the State address that took credit for already lowering taxes by \$1 billion during his decade in office. "But I also understand the cost of failing to invest prudently and sustainably in our future. 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."

Just two weeks ago, he urged lawmakers not to change the sales tax system and its \$100 per person grocery tax credit. "I see no reason to change our current system and I oppose efforts to do so."

If he takes a read of the public, he'll find the Legislature acted impulsively. Boise State University's Public Policy Survey found 65.3 percent of Idahoans believed taxes were about right, 62.1 percent opposed withdrawing dollars from the general fund to pay for highways and 80.5 percent ranked education funding as their top concern.

All of which adds up to vetoing both the sales tax and highway bills. With the Legislature adjourned for the year, Otter's word would be final. There would be no opportunity to override his decision.

But with Otter, the question is not whether he's right. The question, as always, is whether he has the courage of his convictions. - M.T.