

# With 20 months to go, Butch throws in the towel

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## **Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

Last week, Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter described transportation funding as "one of the central focuses and primary frustrations of my three terms as governor."

Then he threw in the towel.

With 20 months and still one more legislative session ahead of him, Otter has dismissed the possibility of doing anything more to shore up financial support for highways and bridges. That's why he allowed the Legislature's flawed \$320 million highway package to become law without his signature.

"... The imminent and ongoing risk to our citizens and the negative impact on our key corridors of commerce are too great to keep Senate Bill 1206 from becoming law," Otter wrote. "What's more, the prospects for meaningful action to generate additional long-term funding for Idaho's roads and bridges in an election year are too remote to let this opportunity pass."

So Otter has settled for a highway system that runs about \$165 million short every year of meeting its maintenance costs.

He has accepted the idea of borrowing against future federal highway dollars even if that means banking on a system that is not stable. Efficient cars are crimping the flow of federal fuel taxes. Rural red states such as Idaho are getting far more federal highway money than they pay in - because urban blue states are subsidizing the system. It's not hard to imagine those larger states growing weary of the arrangement.

One day, Idaho may figure out how to get long-haul truckers to pay for the wear and tear they inflict on highways. Until then, a registration fee system that does not charge truckers based on how much they carry and how far they travel will overcharge ordinary motorists 26 percent while semi-truck operators are undercharged 27 percent.

And at some point, Idaho will devise a system that fairly charges people driving highly efficient vehicles, such as hybrids. But neither will happen on Otter's watch.

Worse yet, Otter has accepted something he once labeled anathema - the transfer of dollars meant for public schools, higher education and general government programs into the purchase of highway and bridge construction. This new bill starts with 1 percent of sales tax revenues, or \$15 million. Any bets if it really stops there?

But if you think Otter's defeatism began with this transportation bill or even this legislative session, think again.

It's been eight years since Otter tangled with conservative members of his own party over highway funding. For months, Otter and lawmakers squared off over nearly two dozen variations of proposed fuel tax and registration fee increases. At one point, the governor got so vexed he vetoed 37 bills in an attempt to apply leverage against lawmakers.

He ended up with virtually nothing - a few extra dollars created by temporarily shifting support of the Idaho State Police from the highway account to the general fund and some miscellaneous fees.

So Otter retreated. Other than setting up a blue ribbon panel headed by Lt. Gov. Brad Little, the governor stayed mum throughout campaign year of 2010.

During the four years that followed, Otter did little more than ask the James A. and Louise McClure Center for Public Policy at the University of Idaho to survey Idahoans.

Only after winning his third term did Otter finally take up the issue again in 2015.

A profile in political courage it was not. He threw it back in the Legislature's lap: "... I am not going to stand here and tell you how to swallow this elephant."

What he got was a 7-cents-a-gallon fuel tax increase, a \$21 registration fee boost and some surplus money.

It was meant merely as a down payment, but Otter had nothing more to say in 2016 or even this year. Only the damage caused by a unusually harsh winter coupled with pent-up frustration directed at Canyon County's commuter-congested interstate highway lanes prodded lawmakers to come up with their own plan.

Who's to say how much more Otter might have achieved had he tried to lead?

Whatever solution emerges, it will have another governor's name attached to it. - M.T.