

What does Otter know that Hoffman doesn't?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

When it comes to Obamacare, Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter knows several things Idaho Freedom Foundation Executive Director Wayne Hoffman does not.

Otter has come out in favor of a state-run health insurance exchange. He says it beats having the feds operate this virtual portal where individuals, small businesses and low-income adults eligible for federal subsidies can shop for insurance.

Hoffman has come out swinging. Along with allies such as Rep. Vito Barbieri, R-Dalton Gardens, Hoffman argues Otter has veered off the path of virtue: "... A state exchange affords almost no flexibility and makes states co-owners of the looming disaster in medicine: higher insurance premiums, more expensive medical care, reduced accessibility and worse patient outcomes."

Hoffman can say anything he likes. Otter has run out of rhetoric. He has to be responsible. He fought Obamacare in the courts and lost. He hoped Mitt Romney would defeat Barack Obama and then repeal the law. Obama won. Even if he wanted to defer the decision to the Idaho Legislature, he can't. His own medical exchange task force suggested Otter can unilaterally create a nonprofit, private entity to construct the exchange.

Neither Hoffman nor Otter have ever diagnosed a disease, written a prescription or authored a health insurance policy. But Otter listens to people who have. Pore over the list of groups urging Otter to take this step and you'll find health care providers, hospitals, insurance carriers, large and small businesses. They're telling him a federal exchange means higher operation fees for consumers.

Because they go to the doctor, on average, less than other Americans, Idahoans pay less for health insurance. But a federal exchange will force those rates up.

They're urging Otter to move forward because they fear a federal exchange will freeze Idaho carriers out of the market - and leave health care providers at the whim of regional and national insurance firms.

Unlike a relative newcomer such as Hoffman, Otter's been around long enough to remember Idaho facing a similar choice after Congress passed environmental laws. If Idaho had not created its own Department of Environmental Quality to enforce those laws, the Environmental Protection Agency would have done the job - no doubt less gently than DEQ.

Then as now, the federal debate has been settled. The question is whether Idahoans are better off managing Obamacare for their fellow citizens.

Otter knows one more thing: Earlier this year, he assigned Hoffman to his health care exchange task force. While task force members operated in good faith to sift through the facts and the options, Hoffman clung to his podium, issuing narrow talking points.

Where the situation demanded creativity, Hoffman displayed ideological rigidity.

When the assignment required Hoffman to ask what was in the best interest of his own state, he pursued a national agenda to continue resisting Obamacare.

As Hoffman placed an index finger in each of his ears and refused to let any new facts pass into his cranium, Otter was watching.

The governor is betting others saw it, too. - M.T.