

# Vick brings a hammer when he needs a wrench

*Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune*

If anybody has an upside-down, inside-out and backwards view of recent Idaho history, it's got to be state Sen. Steve Vick.

The two-term Dalton Gardens Republican insists Idahoans need protection from tax increases. He wants a constitutional amendment requiring any new tax to win a two-thirds vote in the Idaho House and state Senate.

Who is he kidding?

This isn't California or Washington, where Democrats control the governor's offices and the legislatures - fertile ground for people such as Washington initiative entrepreneur Tim Eyman to argue blocking the democratic pulse of majority rule is needed to prevent higher taxes.

This is Idaho, a place so Republican its state colors alternate between maroon and crimson. Four of every five legislative seats are held by the GOP. Every Statehouse office is Republican controlled.

Tax increases?

You have a better chance of being struck by lightning while cashing in the winning Powerball ticket.

On the other hand, you can just about count on Idaho politicians continuing to cut taxes - for the very well-off - at the expense of everyone else.

Consider the recent history:

- Against the advice of Gov. Dirk Kempthorne, lawmakers permanently cut income taxes on the eve of the 2001 recession. When revenues crashed, they responded with a temporary sales tax increase.
- In 2006, Gov. Jim Risch and a GOP Legislature rushed through a plan to cut property taxes on corporations and wealthy families while raising sales taxes on moderate-income earners. The tax shift then undermined stable funding for schools, triggering additional supplemental property taxes to make up the difference.
- Earlier this year, the GOP cut income taxes for corporations and top wage earners by \$35 million. Not only does that mean less help for schools still digging out from the Great Recession, but it leaves the state budget unable to pay its bills without burning up its reserves.

And now the Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry wants to eliminate the property taxes big businesses and industry pay on equipment. It's worth about \$140 million. Take it out of local government revenues and it could mean deep cuts and/or shifting a higher share of the tax burden on homeowners and small businesses. If the state picks up the tab, it means perennial recession-era budgets for public schools, higher education and state services.

It's not as if Idaho has a bucket of extra cash to spread around. It spends less per pupil than all but one state. The share of Idaho's personal income devoted to public schools has dropped 23 percent - or about \$550 million a year - in a decade. It's become so dire even Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter concedes the state has failed to meet minimum school funding levels mandated by the Idaho Constitution.

Idaho has sliced a quarter out of the higher education account, forcing tuition increases beyond the reach of many families.

To say nothing of the most vulnerable among us who are going without basic services and health care just to shave a few percentage points off the Medicaid budget.

This state doesn't need a two-thirds majority to protect big taxpayers. Armed with campaign checkbooks and influential lobbyists, they're doing just fine.

It's the rest of us - parents of public school students, moderate- and middle-income families and homeowners who need a shield against crummy school budgets, emergency property tax levies and the starve-the-beast mentality of the people running things in Boise.

So Vick may be right about getting a two-thirds majority vote standard in place. But not to protect the well-heeled from the rest of us.

It's the other way around. - M.T.