Otter's unsought legacy is Obamacare

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter just concluded his most successful of seven legislative sessions.

Otter passed his signature issue: putting the state rather than the feds in charge of the Obamacare-mandated health insurance exchanges.

This was no small feat. It meant taking on the ideological fringe of his party and the Idaho Freedom Foundation.

But he had the better coalition - hospitals, health insurance companies, health care providers and the business community.

He also had the better argument. Whether it's environmental policy or wolf management, Idaho knows how to implement federal mandates. Doing so here promised to keep Idaho insurance rates lower and preserve local jobs.

Just the same, there is no small amount of irony here.

It was Otter who jumped first into the courts, asking them to declare Obamacare unconstitutional.

It was Otter who buttressed his successful 2010 re-election campaign on his distaste for the federal law.

And it was Otter in his 2011 State of the State address who first spoke the words that led to that legislative session's infatuation with nullifying the federal law.

And yet it is this issue that delivered Otter's singular legislative achievement.

Instead of Otter stopping lawmakers from expanding the state Capitol building in 2007, he delivered a key feature of Obamacare.

Instead of compelling lawmakers to enact his vision of targeted sales tax relief for Idaho's neediest, Idahoans got the Legislature's version, a broad-based and expensive measure - and Obamacare.

Rather than Otter's 2008 or 2009 gambits to infuse Idaho's crumbling highway and bridge system with more money, he has Obamacare.

Otter wanted total repeal of Idaho's $141 million personal property tax. Thankfully, he didn't get it. The Legislature settled for a $20 million package focused on smaller businesses - and Obamacare.

With state schools Superintendent Tom Luna as his partner, Otter supported 2011's package of bills upending teacher contract rights, imposing a top-down merit pay model and siphoning money from educators into technology - until voters shot down all three by margins of 57 to 66 percent.

And instead of prevailing with the state Senate to confirm Joan Hurlock of Buhl as his appointee on the Fish and Game Commission, you got Obamacare.

It's only a snapshot. There's still time for Otter to deliver some other significant legislative achievement. The pragmatic Legislature that Otter found more receptive to his health insurance exchange package may entertain his other initiatives. The economic doldrums that have crimped Otter's opportunities may be easing.

Just the same, the second major component of health care reform is Otter's next big opportunity for legislative success. Once you get past the visceral disdain Idaho Republicans have for anything linked to President Barack Obama, all the facts line up behind expanding Medicaid coverage for Idaho's working poor adults.

Because the feds will pay 100 percent of the cost for the first three years and no less than 90 percent thereafter, it's far cheaper than Idaho's patchwork of county medically indigent programs and a state catastrophic insurance program. No less than conservative state Rep. Tom Loertscher, R-Iona, says expanding Medicaid and shutting down the state system is a $478 million tax cut.

Plus it translates into better, preventive health care, which may save an estimated 600 lives a year, while expanding Idaho's economy by $277 million annually.

So here's betting that next year, Otter will have an easier time selling a tax cut and better health care to lawmakers than he will promoting higher fuel taxes and registration fees to repair roads and bridges.

If that happens, Otter's legacy will be implementing Obamacare in the Gem State. Perhaps they'll even call it Ottercare. - M.T.