Idaho in your rear view mirror

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

The people who are the future of Idaho are giving up on Idaho.

Last year, more people in their 20s left the state than moved in.

And while the Gem State added workers in their 30s, 40s and 50s, the growth rate for each slowed. In fact, Idaho's work force - not just the participation rate but the actual total number of people available for employment - was smaller in March than it had been 15 months earlier.

Last year more people left the state than moved in - the first time that's happened since the 1980s, a decade that saw the state lose nearly 37,000 individuals between 1982 and 1988.

Why would anyone be surprised? As bad as the economy may be anywhere else, it's worse here:

- Idaho's per capita income is lower than all but Mississippi - and Mississippi is gaining. Five years ago, Idaho incomes at least were better than eight states. At one point in the mid-1990s, Idaho's per capita income was within 15 percentage points of the national average. Today, it's 23 percent short.
- 7.7 percent of Idaho's jobs - the highest rate in the country - pay minimum wage.
- If you have a job in Idaho, odds are you're making less than if you were doing the same thing elsewhere.

That includes 14,600 people who earn the lowest median wage in their occupation nationally. Among them are optometrists, medical and clinical lab technicians, light truck and delivery service drivers, and computer hardware engineers.

Another 47,000 are working in the second-lowest rung of their occupations in the country. These include special education teachers and computer network support specialists.

Then there are 242,000 Idahoans who work at occupations where their salaries fall behind counterparts in 40 other states.

Who's moving in?

Retirees.

Idaho's share of people ages 55 and older grew 5 percentage points in the last decade - faster than all but 11 states. People living in retirement communities such as Lewiston know what that means:

A spike in lower-paying service-sector jobs. Older people need health care, restaurants and transportation.

A drop in better-paying production jobs. Retirees don't buy many appliances, homes and manufactured goods.

And a greater difficulty persuading voters to make investments in its schools and community. Retirees don't have kids in school.

During all that time, Idaho's economic strategy has been a one-trick pony. Whenever and where ever possible, cut taxes.

GOP governors and lawmakers lowered income tax rates in 2000-01 and again in 2012.

They shifted school support from property taxes to the sales tax.

They reduced personal property taxes first on farms and now on businesses. And they expanded the grocery tax credit for all income groups.

Mission accomplished: Idaho now has the 51st lowest tax burden in the nation.

Of course that requires making spending cuts. The share of Idaho's personal income now devoted to public education is more than 20 percent - or $550 million - lower than it was at the turn of the century.

College and university students have seen their tuition skyrocket but not enough to compensate for the loss of state support.

The one exception occurred this year. Expanding Medicaid to low-income adults under Obamacare would save Idaho taxpayers $40 million next year while infusing $365 million into Idaho's economy. As long as it's Obamacare, Idaho lawmakers and Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter are dragging their heels.

No one can say if these policies are behind this emerging exodus of Idaho's younger and mobile workers. But this much is clear: Nothing in Idaho's low-tax, low-services, starve-education model stopped the migration, either. - M.T.