

Fulcher factor could lift Balukoff's chances

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Republican state Sen. Russ Fulcher could be the best friend Democratic gubernatorial hopeful A.J. Balukoff has right now.

A veteran Boise School Board chairman and businessman, Balukoff Tuesday kicked off his campaign to oust Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter. In doing so, Balukoff rebuffed those who urged him to set his sights on the state superintendent of public instruction office now held by Republican Tom Luna, whose political career may no longer be salvageable.

For Balukoff, taking on Otter is far more difficult and the Fulcher factor may be what keeps it from being impossible.

Of course, if the Meridian Republican upsets Otter in the closed May 20 GOP primary election, all bets are off. That would be reminiscent of the 1966 primary when Sen. Don Samuelson, R-Sandpoint, ousted three-term Republican Gov. Bob Smylie. Samuelson went on to narrowly defeat Democrat Cecil Andrus, who returned the favor four years later.

Andrus, who attended Balukoff's announcement, hyped the analogy, telling the Spokesman-Review's Betsy Russell: "We've had surprises before. I was elected."

If nothing else, Fulcher's challenge ensures that Otter's eighth legislative session will be as unproductive as the seven that preceded it.

Otter won't push to prop up a system that falls \$262 million short every year of maintaining the state's network of highways and bridges. A GOP legislative majority skittish about its own right-wing flank would block him anyway.

And if Otter was already reluctant to accept 100 percent federal support to extend Medicaid to 104,000 working poor adults, Fulcher's challenge guarantees nothing will change in 2014.

Otter would have every logical and moral reason to proceed. Taxpayers who now pay 100 percent of county medically indigent and state Catastrophic Health Care programs would save up to \$80 million a year. Businesses would avoid paying up to \$18 million a year in penalties. Health care consumers might save about \$482 million in cost-shifting. Idaho's economy would expand by \$750 million and 16,000 jobs. And some 600 Idaho lives would be spared.

But it's part of Obamacare and Fulcher has already made Otter's support of a state-based health insurance exchange his rallying cry.

Left unsettled is education. Otter has backed his task force's recommendation to boost spending by more than \$350 million - including restoring \$82.5 million in operational funds Idaho's schools lost to recession-era budget cuts and boosting teacher pay by \$253 million.

But the governor also has pledged to continue cutting the taxes businesses pay - either on equipment or through income taxes. The more he cuts taxes, the less he can give schools.

Lowering business taxes keeps Fulcher at bay, even if it means Otter must backpedal his support for the school package.

Cue Balukoff. That's just the opportunity he desires.

Education is the chief vulnerability of any Idaho Republican. Idahoans rank public school support as their top priority, yet they tolerate a GOP record that ranges between indifference and outright hostility toward that program.

Last year, the GOP establishment found itself on the outside looking in while a coalition of Democrats, independents and Republican moms trounced the Luna school overhaul package Otter had promoted,

If Otter approaches the fall campaign with nothing to show but a series of substantial cuts in school funding, Balukoff has the opportunity to make the race a referendum on education.

That still makes Balukoff's effort a long shot at best and quixotic at worst.

But without Fulcher pushing Otter further to the right, he'd have no shot at all. - M.T.