

Look at how Otter handles your tax money

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

If Idaho's governor were intent on rebuilding a state still shaking off the effects of a deep recession, he'd marshal resources from an emerging economic recovery struggling to refill the budget holes still left behind.

He would aggressively restore the estimated \$113 million schools lost in their operational accounts.

Such a governor would help state employees at least keep up with inflation, let alone recover the losses suffered through three years of pay freezes during the past half-decade.

And he would talk about restoring money drained from programs meant to help the most vulnerable among us.

But that's not the governor Idaho has.

Instead, we have Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter, whose eighth State of the State address Monday continued to pursue the narrow ideology of shrinking state government.

During the recession, he justified his stance in the name of prudence - deliberately undershooting revenue estimates and cutting more deeply than required.

With the state's coffers refilling, Otter has come up with a new rationale - pegging state spending below overall state economic growth.

And so he makes a meager \$35 million down payment on restoring school funding - and issues an ambiguous pledge to complete his own task force's \$350 million program in five years.

He tells state workers - whose wages now fall 19 percent behind what they're worth on the open market - to tighten their belts, again.

Same for teachers, who will see \$21 million meant for their compensation and training transferred elsewhere to make Otter's budget balance.

He socks away another \$74.1 million to various state bank accounts - which already are bulging with nearly \$200 million. That's like lecturing a man coming off a starvation diet about the virtues of fasting.

He dangles \$30 million for a third year of tax relief. Last year, lawmakers trimmed \$20 million from the the personal property tax businesses pay on equipment. The year before, they cut \$35 million from income taxes on corporations and wealthier individuals.

And he wastes money. Lots of it. Millions in fact.

Refusing to accept Obamacare's offer to expand Medicaid to more than 100,000 working poor adults does not mean all those people will go without getting care. Some will still get help at hospital emergency rooms, and when they do, Idaho taxpayers will pay for their care through the county medically indigent fund - with their property taxes - and the state Catastrophic Health Care program - with their sales and income taxes.

Otter's choice not to expand Medicaid is costing you \$40.5 million in state and local taxes through the current fiscal cycle that ends June 30.

His refusal to act in the next budget year will ding you another \$83.1 million. The year after that, the cost ratchets up to \$85.2 million.

Otter says now is not the time to expand Medicaid because he's afraid the federal government will renege down the road, leaving Idaho taxpayers holding the bag. That's never happened before, but it makes a convenient argument for a governor whose No. 1 priority is "gettin' me re-elected" against an insurrection from the Tea Party fringe of his own party.

But add it up: By unnecessarily padding reserves, extending more tax relief to his corporate backers or burning up money on health care to protect his political right flank, Otter is leaving \$200 million on the table.

Those are his priorities. But it's your tax money he's playing with. - M.T.