

# Idaho's bottom line melts into a dotted line

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

You've heard of the proverbial bottom line.

The one the potentates in Boise are so fond of citing.

Especially when it involves cutting school funding or health care for the vulnerable.

The money simply is not there, they say.

Sorry.

But it's the bottom line.

Here's the odd thing.

This year, the good old bottom line has dissolved. It's become a series of dots and dashes with lots of white space in between.

How else can you explain Idaho lawmakers wasting \$90 million?

That's how much the state would save if it accepted Obamacare's offer to extend Medicaid to about 100,000 Idaho adults living near the poverty line. The feds will pay 100 percent of the costs for the first three years and never less than 90 percent thereafter.

Among the 26 governors who have signed up are seven Republicans, including Utah's Gary Herbert.

These low-income individuals earn too little to qualify for the subsidies that would enable them to purchase insurance on the private market. So when they get sick or hurt, they turn to the state medically indigent program.

Counties pick up the first \$11,000 of each claim. That costs local property taxpayers at least \$35 million a year.

The state, through its Catastrophic Health Care program, pays the rest, which runs more than \$35 million.

Expanded Medicaid would eliminate the need for both programs. It also would relieve the state of about \$10 million in health care costs in the prisons and another \$10 million spent on community mental health programs.

To say nothing of the \$18 million Idaho businesses would be spared in health care costs or penalties under the new health care act.

Not to mention the number of Idahoans - anywhere from 100 to 600 - who each year would be spared a premature death if they get the kind of regular health care Medicaid provides.

So state Rep. John Rusche, D-Lewiston - a pediatrician and former health insurance administrator - had a strong case when he walked into the House Health and Welfare Committee with a Medicaid expansion bill.

His argument is getting stronger by the day.

Thanks to the machinations of former Administration Director Mike Gwartney and his successor, Teresa Luna, the federal pipeline paying for the Idaho Education Network was sealed off last year. So the state has to cough up \$14.5 million to keep IEN afloat.

Luna now says the feds may ask for another \$13.3 million of their money back.

Then there's the tax revenues. Last month, they plummeted, leaving the state about \$23.9 million short. Of course, it's only one month and anything can happen between now and the close of the fiscal cycle on June 30.

But if you're the Chicken Little variety of state lawmaker, you may be inclined to withdraw those offers of modest pay increases to teachers and public employees.

You might want to think twice about restoring health care programs to the poor.

Certainly, you'd advise schools that the talk of helping them replace money lost during the Great Recession was just that - talk.

Here's the really painful part: You'd have to tell your friends among the well-heeled and the politically connected that there simply is no more money available for tax cuts.

Rusche's plan buys the state treasury a \$55 million cushion. Yet he got a cold shoulder. Following Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's lead, GOP lawmakers say this is not the year to consider Medicaid expansion. Committee members killed Rusche's bill without so much as a public hearing.

Not because they think he's wrong.

Not because they like wasting money.

Or because they don't care about the people who may lose their lives without this help.

Rather, it's because they fear the voters.

Not all voters.

Just those few who dominate the closed Republican primary election.

Too many of them suffer from what author Jonathan Alter calls Obama Derangement Syndrome. In other words, if President Obama is behind something - even if it means a good deal for Idaho taxpayers - they're against it.

And that is the bottom line. - M.T.