

It's a loser, but tax shift is all that Risch has

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

In this newspaper Sunday and elsewhere, Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho, is defending his 2006 scheme to cut the \$260 million school maintenance and operation property tax levy and replace about \$210 million by raising Idaho's sales tax from five to six cents.

Why remind everyone?

Unless you're part of the Idaho 1 percent, odds are the M&O tax shift hurt you more than it helped.

Eight years ago, Risch was Idaho's second banana when Gov. Dirk Kempthorne was elevated to become President George W. Bush's secretary of the Interior.

As Idaho's interim chief executive, Risch insisted on calling 105 lawmakers into a one-day special session in the dog days of August - and then ramming through his bill. He was elected to the U.S. Senate in 2008 after Larry Craig retired.

If, like Risch, you owned lots of property and earned wads of cash, this was a reasonably good deal. One of the richest members of the Senate, Risch acknowledged in 2009 that his tax shift saved him about \$4,000 each year in property taxes.

Likewise, corporations and out-of-state landlords made out all right.

But unless you were earning about \$135,000 in 2006 - and considerably more today - you probably wound up paying more in higher sales taxes than you saved in reduced property taxes.

And since Mr. Risch went to Washington, school property taxes have skyrocketed. To compensate for cuts at the state level, the number of school districts relying upon supplemental tax levies has more than doubled, from 40 at the turn of the century to almost 90 today. The \$60 million of voluntary taxes Idahoans paid 14 years ago is up to \$190 million today.

If you're a public school student - or the parent of one - Risch's plan didn't do you much good. First, it siphoned \$50 million out of the state coffers.

Next, it set the stage for another huge loss. Once the sales tax reached 6 percent, lawmakers felt obliged to reimburse

Idahoans for the taxes they pay on groceries. When fully implemented in two years, this tax credit will drain \$130 million every year from the account that funds education.

Then Risch's plan destabilized public school budgets - replacing a reliable source of money at the local level with more volatile sales and income taxes on the eve of the Great Recession. Risch's

former colleagues in the GOP-controlled Legislature wound up passing the first public school budget cut in Idaho history.

And if you live in one of Idaho's poorer communities, Risch's plan was a double whammy. The system he vaporized at least equalized the local tax effort. Now if you live in a school district like Snake River, you pay 30 times as much to keep up with a wealthy area such as McCall.

All of which helped launch Idaho's death spiral to near-last-in-the-nation rankings for incomes and school support.

That wasn't Risch's intention, of course. But his arrogance and ambition blinded him to the risks.

So why does he continue to talk about it?

Why doesn't he, instead, focus public attention on the legislative accomplishments he's piled up these last six years in Washington, D.C.?

Because he has none.

He's sponsored just 16 bills in the Senate.

In one two-year period, the Center for Responsive Politics ranked him as second least productive member of the Senate.

Last year, he candidly told the Idaho Statesman's Dan Popkey he wasn't exactly breaking a sweat: "Governor will wear you down. You can't do that job permanently. This you can do ad infinitum."

Observed Popkey: "To hear him wax eloquent about life in the Senate makes one wonder if he risks being branded as a dilettante."

Risch has no choice but to keep talking about his M&O tax shift. What else has he got to show for the last eight years in public life? - M.T.