

Last time Idaho raised the fuel tax, the battle was bitter

William L. Spence/Lewiston Tribune

BOISE - "Hatred and discontent."

That, in the words of one participant, was what it took to get the last fuel tax increase through in 1996 - that and a major flood, plus some bullying by the governor.

Whatever one thinks of the struggle to boost transportation funding this session, it's worth remembering the sparring hasn't become physical yet. It's still just a war of words and ideologies.

Apparently that wasn't the case in '96, when "actual blood" was reportedly spilled in the Senate majority caucus room following a tense floor vote.

On a purely legislative basis, the fight was even more intense that year than this. Nearly a dozen funding bills were considered. They were quickly whittled down to one, which called for a 4-cent gas tax increase, raised vehicle registration fees by 30 percent and generated about \$34 million in additional revenue.

The measure was initially rejected by the House Transportation Committee, reconsidered and sent to the House floor, where it passed with a six-vote margin. The Senate committee then rejected it 5-4. The deciding vote was cast by Sen. Cecil Ingram, R-Boise, who said he'd only vote for the bill if heavy, 129,000-pound commercial trucks were allowed on state highways.

The '96 session was also when mandatory worker's compensation insurance was approved for all farm laborers - a move that took money out of the pockets of farm owners. Ingram said the heavier weight limits were needed to help offset those costs, as well as the higher fuel tax.

News reports at the time indicated Gov. Phil Batt did some arm twisting and convinced Ingram to reconsider his vote. Batt also agreed to appoint a gubernatorial task force to study the heavy truck issue.

The carrot-and-stick approach worked. Ingram switched his vote, the bill came out of committee 5-4 and passed the Senate by the same margin, 18-17. The Legislature adjourned two days later.

Batt later credited the northern Idaho floods with helping put the legislation over the top.

The floods began in early February. They were preceded by 10 days of heavy snowfall - including more than 6 feet in Moscow - followed by a week of frigid, subzero temperatures. Then it warmed up and began to rain.

Rivers all across the Pacific Northwest began to spill over their banks. Ice flows acted as battering rams, breaching levees along the St. Joe River and flooding more than 100 homes in St. Maries. The outlet dam at Winchester Lake was over-topped and almost failed. Lapwai and Culesac were evacuated.

The floods continued for three or four days, causing more than \$40 million of damage in Idaho and about \$800 million across the region.

Batt gave a joint address to the House and Senate on Feb. 20, saying the state's entire cash reserve of \$23.5 million would be needed to fix the damage. He pledged the first \$6 million from any fuel tax increase would go to the region as well.

Lawmakers from north central Idaho were critical to advancing the legislation. Former Sens. Bruce Sweeney of Lewiston and Gary Schroeder of Moscow were on the Senate Transportation Committee, while former Reps. Charles Cuddy of Orofino and Frank Bruneel of Lewiston were on House Transportation.

The hatred and discontent reportedly followed the Senate vote. Republicans went onto the floor thinking they had more than a one-vote margin, only to see some caucus members switch sides.

My guess is we avoid a similar fate this year. Egos were pretty bruised after the Senate trashed a House tax reform bill without a vote last week, but I'm betting \$5 they adjourn today - with a transportation funding agreement in tow.

If not, it's time to pray for rain.

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