

Baptism by fire for freshmen lawmakers

Conference committee, special session an odd intro for 18

How north central Idaho lawmakers voted in special session:

Yes - Sen. Dan Schmidt, D-Moscow; Rep. Paulette Jordan, D-Plummer; Rep. Caroline Troy, R-Genesee; Sen. Dan Johnson, R-Lewiston; Rep. Dan Rudolph, D-Lewiston; Rep. John Rusche, D-Lewiston.

No - Sen. Sheryl Nuxoll, R-Cottonwood; Rep. Shannon McMillan, R-Silverton; Rep. Paul Shepherd, R-Riggins.

William L. Spence/Lewiston Tribune

Idaho's freshmen lawmakers hit the trifecta this year, experiencing their first legislative session as well as a rare conference committee, and capping it off with an even rarer special session Monday.

"It's historic. What an interesting introduction for a freshman," said Rep. Caroline Troy, R-Genesee, one of 18 newcomers elected to the Idaho Legislature last year.

The 89-day regular session adjourned April 11, about 12 hours after a joint House-Senate conference committee reached an agreement on transportation funding.

That was the first conference committee called since 2007. It was followed by just the fourth special session in the past 25 years and the first to be held since 2006.

Monday's one-day meeting was needed to approve legislation that brings Idaho into compliance with federal child support requirements.

Similar legislation died in committee on a 9-8 vote the final day of the regular session, prompting the federal government to say it would withhold \$16 million in child support enforcement funding if the decision wasn't reversed, as well as another \$30 million for the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program.

The move also threatened the state's ability to collect upward of \$200 million in annual child support payments.

Initial concerns about the bill had to do with possibly subjecting Idaho residents to foreign judgments, including Islamic Sharia laws. Lawmakers also objected to coercive federal requirements - a drumbeat that became louder as they began to take heat for jeopardizing Idaho's child support system.

Troy, who is not on the committee that killed the bill, said she appreciated the concerns about federal overreach and state sovereignty.

"They're legitimate concerns," she said. "But in the end, I just didn't feel comfortable putting our most vulnerable people at risk. I didn't think Idaho had a Plan B to make sure the (child support) payments were protected."

Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter, who convened the special session, made a similar comment Tuesday.

While it's appropriate to question the state-federal relationship, threatening the state's child support payment system isn't the right approach, he said. "The bottom line is this legislation will keep many thousands of Idaho's single parents and children from potentially losing the court-ordered support of non-custodial parents."

The measure passed the House on a 49-21 vote, followed by a 33-2 vote in the Senate.

The only opposition came from Republicans - including the entire 7th Legislative District delegation: Sen. Sheryl Nuxoll of Cottonwood, Rep. Shannon McMillan of Silverton (who also voted against the measure twice in committee) and Rep. Paul Shepherd of Riggins.

"There were too many things that didn't make sense," Shepherd said Tuesday afternoon. "I still think there wasn't enough information."

For example, the bill requires Idaho to enact a 2008 amendment to the Uniform Interstate Family Support Act, which helps states enforce child support orders in a consistent manner.

However, the amendment also includes provisions related to a proposed international treaty, which allows child support judgments to be handled across national boundaries.

"How much is it going to cost the United States to set up a bureaucracy to handle that?" Shepherd asked. "And what else is in the treaty? It would be good to know that, since we're endorsing it."

He also questioned whether an international treaty is really needed. If the bulk of child support collections occur within and between the 50 states, they could implement a joint collection system themselves.

"Government always uses kids and safety," Shepherd said. "Those are the hot issues to get you to do what they want. They're using scare tactics to get this treaty."

Nuxoll was one of two senators to oppose the measure Monday. Although she supported it during the regular session, she subsequently changed her mind, citing concerns about Sharia law and the potential loss of constitutional rights.

Nuxoll could not immediately be reached for comment Tuesday, but in an earlier email message she highlighted additional concerns with the bill and the proposed treaty, including data security and due process.

"Money always seems more important than the Constitution or fundamental rights," she wrote. "The federal government is using the 'best interest of the children' to force the state into compliance. This shows the government doesn't have the general welfare of the family at heart. I can't vote to pass a bill this complicated and complex."

Idaho Democrats sent out their own news release Tuesday, noting that 416,000 Idahoans - including 28 percent of all Idaho children - rely on state child support services.

"It is our duty to stand up for Idaho families and children. We did that (Monday)," said House Minority Leader John Rusche of Lewiston. "It's troubling that so many members of the Idaho Legislature are making public policy decisions based on vague fears and poor information. They continue to harm the ability of this body to pass reasonable, responsible legislation that puts families, businesses and communities first."