

Idaho's interim committees still working on suggestions

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI, Associated Press

Idaho lawmakers who spent last summer dissecting some of the state's most contentious issues have yet to submit legislation, but key leaders remain hopeful that proposals will be finalized before the end of the session.

Four legislative interim committees are expected to meet at least once more before submitting recommendations on public defense reform, school broadband, state contracts and urban renewal.

Committee members still have time to submit their vetted proposals — the Statehouse is only three weeks into the session — but lawmakers are facing pressure to adjourn as early as possible because of the looming primary election come spring. This makes getting aggressive proposals out and front of lawmakers a priority.

Here's where the committees currently stand:

PUBLIC DEFENSE REFORM

After spending hours parsing possible changes to how the state provides legal representation to those who can't afford their own attorney, the Public Defense Interim Committee is finally scheduled to vote on a draft bill Monday.

The bill would allow the Public Defense Commission to address counties not complying with state standards. If mediation failed, then the state would bill the county for stepping in to provide extra lawyers, training or any other resources.

Lawmakers have been slow to make significant changes to the state's criminal justice system despite years of warnings from critics that it fails to fairly represent low-income defendants. The American Civil Liberties Union of Idaho is currently appealing a decision to dismiss their lawsuit that described the state's current system as unconstitutional.

CONTRACT LAWS

So far, this group has been the slowest to come to agreements on possible recommendation compared to other interim committee's progress.

Republican Rep. Neil Anderson of Blackfoot, the co-chair of the group, says there's "still two or three things" that need to be worked out before the group meets again.

Idaho's contract bidding and selection process became one of the most discussed topics during the 2015 legislative session after a judge threw out a \$60 million contract to provide broadband in public schools.

Suggested changes have included providing penalties for unethical behavior, requiring uniform training standards for state employees involved in the procurement process, and mandating annual reporting on high-risk contracts.

Anderson said he's uncertain when and how many more times his group will need to meet, he said that a proposal will be submitted before adjournment.

BROADBAND IN SCHOOLS

After the collapse of the statewide public school broadband program, lawmakers have had no appetite to repeat the old model.

Instead, the broadband interim committee has come up with two bills that would allow local school districts to manage their own high-speed broadband internet contracts with state assistance. One bill would create a broadband advisory committee, while the other proposal would create a broadband grant fund that school districts could request to help pay broadband infrastructure projects.

Republican Rep. Luke Malek of Coeur d'Alene said the panel will meet Tuesday to listen to public testimony.

URBAN RENEWAL

The co-chairs on the Urban Renewal Interim Committee are meeting this weekend to finalize a draft bill that will go before the committee on Monday.

Details are still being hashed out, but Sen. Dan Johnson, R-Lewiston, says he's confident the bill will be submitted to the House Revenue and Taxation Committee by Friday.

Urban renewal agencies collect taxes from improvements in their municipal districts and use that money to attract and finance new projects, particularly in blighted areas.

Municipalities have argued that urban renewal agencies help lure major businesses to Idaho, while critics say the boards have little oversight and take tax dollars away from key projects.

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