

Testy telecommunications and inner workings of Legislature

William L. Spence/Lewiston Tribune

BOISE - The telecommunications infrastructure at the Statehouse is on the fritz.

They did some work on the building over the summer, and now phone service is hit or miss. In the Capitol press office, my colleagues have taken to cheering when they get four bars on their phone. Often they have to step out to get a signal. When a call comes in, they'll grab a notepad and run into the hallway, hoping for a clear connection.

The foyer over by the disabled-access entrance is another good location. It has decent reception, as well as a couple of heating ducts that are the perfect height for taking notes while you're talking. I was there a few weeks ago and two other reporters showed up to make calls. We each took a corner to try to get a little privacy.

Last night someone walked past the press office with a phone to his ear going, "Hello? Hello?" I should have told him about the foyer.

The online streaming of committee meetings is equally uncertain. It skips and cuts out, often right at a critical moment. I just tried to bring up the budget committee video feed and couldn't even get a screen shot.

It's hard not to see all this as a metaphor for legislative transparency and responsiveness.

I can't count the number of hearings I've attended where the testimony is entirely skewed one way or the other and the committee votes the opposite way.

Can you hear me now? Click. Hello? Hello?

On the flip side, there are ideological bills that virtually no one asks for, but that lawmakers decide to bestow on the public anyway.

Part of the debate over this year's \$51 million tax cut proposal was, why? Lawmakers already have approved \$1 billion in cumulative tax relief since 2008. Is anyone really demanding more?

Donna Yule, executive director of the Idaho Public Employees Association, raised this issue during the House committee hearing on the bill. She noted a recent Boise State University public opinion survey that found two-thirds of Idahoans feel the tax burden is just about right.

"Since we apparently don't have enough revenue to pay employees adequately, fund education or maintain state roads and bridges, it seems the height of irresponsibility to give a tax break to people who say they don't want it and don't need it," Yule said.

The House approved the measure on a 58-11 party line vote.

I have to say, though, the institutional tone-deafness hasn't been as jarring this session as in some past years. That may be due to the absence of weighty bills. While White House reporters bounce from one crisis to the next, Idaho capitol correspondents are left choosing between measures that redefine "massage therapy establishments" as "massage schools," regulate maintenance endowment funds for cemeteries or create exemptions to allow certain "exhibition-style" dog races at county fairs.

Three-quarters of the non-budget bills I've written about this session already are dead or unlikely to proceed. With the possible exception of tax relief, there seems to be little inclination to tackle anything even moderately difficult or controversial.

I was talking with a reporter last week about the lack of substantive bills this session and she wondered why any of us even bothered showing up. I spoke with a senator later that afternoon, and he told me he was talking with a fellow legislator about the kind of bills they're seeing this year "and he wondered why we even bothered coming here."

I guess it doesn't matter if the phones are working when everyone is asleep.

Spence covers politics for the Tribune. He may be contacted at bspence@lmtribune.com or (208) 791-9168.