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3 bills to watch in Boise

This is not a good year to have a new project before the Idaho Legislature. Lawmakers have said they will focus on the budget above everything else when the legislative session opens Monday.

Bonneville County Commissioner Roger Christensen noted that anything requiring new money has small hope of making it past committee deliberations.

"You're going to see a lot of house-cleaning-type bills," Christensen said. "This isn't a year to try pushing new services or to expect money from the Legislature. The budget is enough of an issue as it is."

Eastern Idaho has three players ready to take the plunge and hope to get a project passed. Christensen set to adjust reimbursement rates for indigent funds. The Catastrophic Health Care Fund (CAT) is mandated by law to help counties cover the cost of medical care for residents who can't pay for themselves.

Residents receive assistance from the fund if they can prove they won't be able to pay their bill within five years. When they have a catastrophic medical emergency, such as a heart attack or a major-injury vehicle accident, the county pays up to \$11,000 of their care. If their emergency costs more to treat, the state steps in, reimbursing a provider at the same rate as would be billed under Medicaid. Statewide, about 1,600 people exceeded the \$11,000 limit last fiscal year.

Christensen, chairman of the CAT board, will be involved in proving to the Legislature that the program deserves the supplemental appropriation the board is seeking. That appropriation probably won't exceed \$8 million. That's in addition to the original \$18.2 million the fund received last session. He also will be a central figure in pitching a change in the reimbursement rate.

The CAT board's goal, he said, is to adjust the rate at which the fund reimburses providers. The fund operates along similar guidelines to federal Medicaid programs. The objective is to save the state money by keeping its reimbursement rates from outstripping federal rates.

While that wouldn't change the county's percentage of the cost, it would reduce the burden on the state. Chamber of Commerce working on job-creation bill. Robb Chiles, president and CEO of the Greater Idaho Falls Area Chamber of Commerce, said he is part of a team writing a new bill intended to help reduce the state's unemployment rate.

The goal is to create jobs by giving incentives to small businesses. "The idea is that small businesses are the engine of a local economy," Chiles said. "If they're doing well, the community is probably doing well, too."

Those incentives will be tax-related, but Chiles said details still are being worked out. Local group wants to see tax break expire for wind farms. In 2005, the Legislature passed a sales tax exemption on construction costs for facilities that produce at least 25 kilowatts of power a year.

The idea was to increase Idaho's competitiveness within the renewable energy market.