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Special session possibility growing

Budget issues could keep legislators in Boise longer

BOISE - Most years, the biggest non-issue in the Idaho Legislature - the one usually only people who work there care about - is how long the session will last. But this year, to no one's surprise, is not like most.

With uncertainty over the economic downturn perhaps the only matter legislators agree on so far, speculation over a special session continues to stew. Some lawmakers say the possibility for an extra session is growing.

"The probability of a special session later in the year is becoming a little higher," Senate Assistant Majority Leader Joe Stegner, R-Lewiston, said Friday. "The chances of us having better information later in the year could be gainful."

In Idaho, a special session of the Legislature may be called only by the governor and only for a specific reason. Legislators cannot consider any other matters, and they are very rare. The last one, in 2006, was called by then-Gov. Jim Risch to raise the sales-tax by a penny and enact the homeowner's exemption.

Stegner said uncertainty over budget revenue for fiscal years 2009, which ends July 1, and 2010, as well as the timing and structure of a federal stimulus package leave a lot of questions unanswered. State budget writers have already slashed \$150 million, or about 4.7 percent, from this year's budget, and said more action is possible

Stegner said while no one in Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter's office is encouraging a special session, and state budget writers are not starting to plan for one, "we have an awful lot of unknowns in the budget equation."

Otter spokesman Jon Hanian declined to comment for this article.

House Speaker Lawrence E. Denney, R-Midvale, and Senate Pro Tem, R-Soda Springs, said at a media luncheon Thursday that while the federal stimulus is likely, it's unclear when it will arrive, how much it will be and what requirements for money will be. As a result, the Legislature is best to set a budget how it normally does.

But the state's own budget crisis has caused some lawmakers to think creatively.

House Majority Leader Mike Moyle, R-Star, suggested last week during an informal meeting with colleagues that the Legislature recess for several weeks and return after a federal stimulus package reached the state and its details were clearer.

"I think that if it's done right you don't need the special session but it all depends on how long we're here and what strings are attached to the (stimulus money)," Moyle said after confirming he had thrown out the idea of a mid-session recess merely as a possibility.

Still, many legislators couldn't recall such a decision happening before and said doing so could create problems.

Session 1

"It's a very, very low probability of happening," said Stegner, who confirmed he had heard about it. "I'm not sure it accomplishes a whole lot."

Indeed, the basic legislative functions would require drastic changes. Lawmakers, as well as the dozens of legislative staffers hired for the session would all have to readjust living arrangements. They must also account for full-time jobs usually put on hold during the Legislature. There's also the approximate \$30,000 in daily costs for the Legislature.

"As it went by, it didn't get much traction with me," said House Assistant Majority Leader [Scott Bedke](#), R-Oakley.

Meanwhile, Sen. [Dean Cameron](#), R-Rupert, the co-chairman of the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee, dismissed the notion of a special session at the moment. "That's not my decision. I'm not going to even think about it," Cameron said. "We'll do our job and stay here until we finish our job." As for a mid-session recess, he said, "I've not heard of that idea, but it's an equally foolish idea."