

Twin Falls Times News, Wednesday, Feb. 24, 2010 – Editorial

Burley lawmaker Wood sticks his neck out for the public good

Years from now, when your community has improvements to an airport or a new hospital, or lower municipal electric rates than the neighboring town, you can thank state Rep. Fred Wood, R-Burley, and his legislative colleagues for their political courage.

They're sponsoring three constitutional amendments that would, if approved by the taxpayers next November, permit airports, hospitals and municipal power companies to take on long-term debt without a public vote.

Two of the proposed amendments, for airports and hospitals, stem from a 2006 Idaho Supreme Court ruling, *Frazier v. City of Boise*. The Idaho Constitution requires public governments to have voter approval for long-term debt, except for "ordinary and necessary" operations. The 2006 ruling narrowed government's ability to assume multiyear debt without voter approval.

Before *Frazier v. Boise*, public hospitals had been able to take on the debt since 1972. "The *Frazier* decision cast doubt on whether they could do that," Wood said.

The proposed amendment would allow county and district hospitals to take on debt, provided that it doesn't need to be paid off with tax revenue. On Tuesday, the measure easily gained the two-thirds vote it needed — 65-5 — with just four Republicans and one Democrat opposing it

The constitutional amendment for airports would allow them to take on debt for projects, facilities and acquisitions, provided that the debt is paid off from airport revenues and not tax funding. The proposal for municipal power companies allows them to enter into long-term agreements with suppliers such as the Bonneville Power Administration without voter approval. Long-term agreements can help cities have more stable rates compared to the having to purchase electricity on an annual basis.

If the amendments pass the Legislature, they'll go on the ballot in the November election for voter approval.

This is not a risk-free political enterprise for Wood and his colleagues, all of whom are philosophically tax skeptics. Boise freelance photographer and tax hawk David Frazier has clout — and holds the philosophical high ground on this issue. But sometimes, doing the greater good for the greater number of Idahoans trumps political expediency. We're indebted to Wood for investing the considerable political capital required to get this done.