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Panhandle Coalition addresses pharmacy bill

Legislation would allow pharmacists to refuse prescriptions based on personal convictions

COEUR d'ALENE -- State and county issues were on the table Saturday morning, as one Idaho legislator was joined by one Kootenai County Commissioner at the weekly Panhandle Coalition meeting at the Lake City Senior Center.

Sen. John Goedde, R-Coeur d'Alene, and Commissioner Rick Currie visited with two dozen members of the community on topics ranging from water quality to the county Comprehensive Plan.

By a hand vote of 14-1 the group agreed to lend its support to the defeat of a proposed House bill that would allow pharmacists to refuse to provide products that go against their personal convictions. Timothy Hunt, a North Idaho field organizer for Planned Parenthood of the Inland Northwest, said the bill would violate individual rights. "There are no laws that require specific inventories," he said.

If passed, the law would open the door to "all kinds of personal positions," said Bill Banger, an organizer of the coalition. "A pharmacist shouldn't have the option to practice medicine," said Karen Cotton, a representative of the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare.

The state budget and the prospects of what to do with anticipated federal stimulus funds was again a priority item for the group. Goedde said lawmakers are struggling to decide how much of the state's reserve funds to use to balance the budget. Some have suggested using it all for fiscal year 2010 and hoping for the best in 2011, he said. That could result in a \$150 million shortfall in 2011, which would mean a 10 percent reduction in school funding.

"I am not a proponent of that," he said. "Can you imagine a school with every 10th classroom without a teacher?"

Queried about whether the Legislature might eventually be forced to raise some taxes to meet the demand for services, Goedde said only some fish and game fees or some sort of transportation tax -- probably an increase in gasoline tax -- is likely.

"The only people affected would be people using cars," he said. "There has been no suggestion of raising the sales or income tax."

A vote on the gas tax is expected Monday, he said. On March 14, the Panhandle Coalition meeting will make way for a larger town hall forum with North Idaho legislators. They have been invited to share their view of the 2009 Legislative session at 8:30 a.m. Saturday in the community room on the lower level of the Coeur d'Alene Public Library, 720 Front Ave.