

Lewiston Tribune, Tuesday, March 16, 2010 — by William Spence (2 pages)

## Lawmakers on 3rd with budget at bat

*Idaho lawmakers appear on track to wrap things within two weeks ... if they can pass spending bills*

BOISE - Idaho lawmakers are on pace to finish their work by the end of next week, although they haven't approved any major budgets yet. A March 26 adjournment would make this the third-shortest session in the past decade, at 75 days. That would be six weeks earlier than last year's 117-day marathon.

The budget bills are the most prominent item on the Legislature's "going home" list. Sen. Joe Stegner, R-Lewiston, said once they're approved, any other bills could simply be abandoned.

"It's happened before," Stegner said. "We could easily be done in two more weeks."

The joint budget committee approved most major budgets the first week of March, including public schools, Medicaid and the Department of Correction. However, the bills haven't shown up on the House or Senate calendars yet. Consequently, there's no firm indication yet whether either body will balk at the spending cuts included in the bills. Stegner doesn't think that will happen, but until the votes actually take place, he said, adjournment "is still up in the air." Other items on the "going home" list include:

- Pay rates for the constitutional officers - Salaries for the governor and other statewide elected officials can't be changed once they're in office, so this is the only chance the Legislature will have to address this issue for the next four years. A bill hasn't yet been introduced.
- The revenue contingency plan - Lawmakers are still discussing what to do if 2010 revenues come in under target after the Legislature adjourns. They want to give the governor some guidance on how to handle the situation, rather than leave it entirely up to him or force him to call a special session.
- School district flexibility - This is the most contentious issue left to resolve. It involves what options local districts will have in the event additional budget cuts are needed in the middle of fiscal 2011. Some lawmakers think the "financial emergency" language added to the K-12 budget bill gives districts all the flexibility they need; others say stronger language is needed to guarantee districts can reopen employee contracts midyear and negotiate salary and benefits reductions if necessary. Legislation related to this issue hasn't yet been introduced.

The House and Senate conduct morning floor sessions every day to debate and vote on bills. In the past few weeks, they've started adding the occasional afternoon session, besides their regular committee work.

The Senate, which currently has more than four dozens bills awaiting action, will conduct extended sessions today and Thursday, and possibly Friday. The House has fewer than three dozen bills on its calendar, although other bills are still moving through committees.