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JFAC co-chair says budgeting was difficult, but service cuts minimized

Sen. [Dean Cameron](#), R-Rupert, is at the top of the list of Idaho lawmakers responsible for putting together the state budget, and he says putting together the next budget was difficult, but ultimately productive, as lawmakers minimized what could have been bigger cuts in services.

For 10 years, Cameron and Rep. [Maxine Bell](#), R-Jerome, have led the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee (JFAC), which puts together the budget.

Looking back, Cameron said that before the start of the 2011 session, he knew going in it would be a difficult budget session, though it was a different set of issues than he thought.

Lawmakers on JFAC ended up balancing the budget largely by following the budget from Gov. Butch Otter and adding additional spending reductions as needed to match a smaller budget than originally laid out by the governor. Instead of a budget battle taking center stage, the education reform plan backed by state schools superintendent Tom Luna became the focal point during much of the legislative session.

Cameron emerged as one of the most prominent Republican opponents of Luna's reforms.

Cameron was a vocal critic of the reform plan on the Senate floor. He said some senators who didn't vote with him said they'd support further changes next year, but now the onus is on lawmakers, not the superintendent, to make those fixes. Any changes next year could be swayed by next year's elections, whether Idaho tax revenues improve and deliver more money to schools.

"If this reform plays out in a way that districts have to lay off teachers, then I think there will be a real adverse affect," he said. "My read of the public is that they won't support that."

Cameron said his vote against the reform package speaks for itself. He does support the referendum to repeal the laws, but he hasn't been asked to sign it.

Cameron said he wouldn't be out front encouraging people to sign the referendum, though he respects voters' rights to repeal state laws. He said he wouldn't back calls to remove Luna from office. "I'm not sure I could go so far as supporting the recall efforts," he said. One of his concerns is that the reforms give the superintendent too much power in spending money in the public schools budget.

He's also said the pay for performance bonuses for teachers and administrators, which currently aren't funded in the next budget, may not have the desired impact, since other parts of the reform laws reduce state funding for

educators' salaries. Cameron said that's a bad way to run a business, and could lead people to look for teaching jobs in other states.

Lawmakers were able to solve the budget concerns, which at one time had a deficit of more than \$100 million, by using one-time funds and making reductions to Medicaid and other state agencies. Cameron said he was much more supportive of the process lawmakers [took to reduce Medicaid](#) than what transpired with education.

"I would've bet you the biggest steak in town that they wouldn't have gotten a \$35 million reduction in Medicaid," Cameron said. "I wish in some ways the education reform had taken a similar approach. You may have come out with a different outcome and a more consensus, less divisive package."

Cameron also said he's not concerned by the use of sweeping funds from some state agencies, as was recommended by the governor. "We left some one-time funds on the table," Cameron said. "In the event that the economy doesn't improve and we need to again replace one-time money with one time money, we've got other sources to go back to."

The budget approved by lawmakers goes into effect in July, and Cameron said it's too early to tell what the impact of the budget will be. He said he feared some agencies' budgets may have been cut too much.

"Public health districts are critically important and they took a full 5 percent reduction this year," Cameron said. "We've cut higher ed repeatedly. It tends not to show up as much because of all the other sources of revenue, which by the way isn't student fees ... There's a reasonable size that comes from student fees but by and large the biggest chunk of funding that higher education receives is from federal funds or grants."

Cameron called money for education an economic engine and said lawmakers will need to find funding for it in the future.

One lasting impact of the completed legislative session could be an increase in public participation. Cameron said there's been a shift to more public involvement, perhaps triggered by the hearings by JFAC.

"I'm hopeful that this is the new norm, that public participation is the new way," he said. Cameron added that the remodeled state Capitol proved its value as committee rooms held large hearings.