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## Legislature OKs election reform

*Bill mandates almost all elections be held in May or November*

Elections in Idaho, now a hodgepodge of various dates and locations, are set to become much more streamlined. Lawmakers in both chambers passed a 98-page bill Tuesday that mandates almost all elections be held in May or November, although schools will be able to hold bond elections in March and August.

Those elections would take place at traditional polling places, rather than a school for bond elections or a library for library district elections. That's quite a contrast to what happens today in Idaho, where more than 400 elections are held at different places throughout the year.

The election consolidation bill passed Tuesday, which now goes to Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter to be signed into law, will solve that problem by providing exact dates and locations, said Sen. Brent Hill, R-Rexburg.

"It's just too easy for conscientious citizens to miss elections," he said on the Senate floor. "There will not be more than four elections a year at the same polling places."

The changes won't take place until Jan. 1, 2011, and the state will contribute \$4.1 million in general fund money to pay for all elections. That figure concerns the bill's opponents because it comes from the same account that funds the state's public schools. By adding more expenditures to the general fund, schools could end up with less money, said Senate Minority Leader Kate Kelly, D-Boise. Restricting the dates of elections also could hamper schools from passing supplemental bond measures they need to function, said Sen. Dick Sagness, D-Pocatello. "What we're doing here is additionally penalizing our schools," he said.

Increasing competition for dollars that fund public schools is a concern, but Senate Majority Leader Bart Davis, R-Idaho Falls, said he didn't want to make counties consolidate elections without giving them the money to do so. "I share in that concern, but I am more troubled passing a bill that is an unfunded mandate," said Davis, who helped write the bill. The state will provide \$1.5 million to counties when the new fiscal year starts July 1.

That will help pay for upgrades to election hardware and software, such as a GIS program that tells county clerks which ballots are given to which voters.

Lawmakers have been wrestling with election consolidation for years. Since 2000, 14 election consolidation bills introduced in the Idaho Legislature have failed, including one this session. Most of the opposition had come from counties, but that changed this year. Both the Idaho Association of Counties and Secretary of State Ben Ysursa support the latest bill.

Sagness, however, questioned the need for an election consolidation law, saying only lawmakers in Boise were clamoring for its passage. "Why do we want to change something that seems to be working so well," the Pocatello Democrat said. That shouldn't matter, Davis responded. "Even if it's not broken, what's wrong with making it better?" he said.