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Hospital, airport praise measures' approval

Officials: Constitutional amendments restore agencies' funding tool

Local hospital and airport leaders said Tuesday's passage of two Idaho constitutional amendments was a vote for the future for such facilities. Measure HJR 4, which had 63.5 percent support, allows public hospitals to incur debt without an election to acquire facilities, equipment, technology and property as long as other revenues - not taxpayer dollars - pay the bill.

HJR 5, which had 53.3 percent support, allows airports to issue non-taxpayer backed bonds for capital improvements without a vote. Constitutional amendments need a simple majority to pass. Joe Morris, former Kootenai Health CEO who was chairman of the Idaho Hospital Association committee that advocated for HJR 4, called the measure a "significant achievement" that will give public hospitals a funding tool for the future. "We have a choice now that we didn't have before," Morris said. "Sixty-four percent (voter approval) is a great endorsement from throughout the state, not just cities that have public hospitals."

There was 58.5 percent support in Kootenai County for the hospital measure and 45.6 percent for the airport amendment. While Kootenai Health doesn't have any immediate expansion plans, a tower and women's and children's facility are on the long-term horizon and the measure could pave the way for funding projects such as those, Morris said. "The smaller, more rural hospitals desperately needed this amendment to pass," he said. "It should have an immediate impact on small hospitals, including Kellogg, St. Maries and Bonners Ferry. That was one of the reasons I was so involved."

Another amendment pertaining to debt, HJR 7, for municipal electric system debts and power contracts, passed with 57 percent. It allows cities owning an electric system to acquire and construct facilities to supply electricity and allows them to enter into agreements to buy or transmit electricity without voter approval. The purchases can't be made with tax dollars.

All three measures are the result of a 2006 lawsuit against the Boise Airport over the construction of a parking garage. The Idaho Supreme Court ruling changed the way airports, public hospitals and city-owned power firms operated. The amendments restore the funding options. Advocates say the measures allow agencies to remain competitive and fill in funding gaps left by revenue shortfalls.

"This will allow airports to do business like a business - from a revenue source as opposed to taxes," said Greg Delavan, Coeur d'Alene Airport director. "It takes the burden off the taxpayers' back."

Delavan said the airport does not have any projects on the drawing board that would benefit from the measure, but it's a tool for the future. All three debt amendments had overwhelming support from the Legislature, which sent the proposals to voters.