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Key panel will hear testimony

Idaho budget committee takes new tack for weighty choices

BOISE – The powerful joint committee that writes all budget bills in the Idaho Legislature is also the only committee that's never taken public testimony – but it will this year.

With huge budget challenges facing the state, the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee is scheduling two public hearings in January in the state Capitol where citizens can weigh in on school funding and health and welfare programs.

“I just felt like it was important for us to give an opportunity for the public to come and express their concerns and share with us their thoughts and ideas,” said Sen. Dean Cameron, R-Rupert, co-chairman of the joint committee. “Certainly when you have a budget challenge like we're facing, I think it requires that we not just do things the way we normally have done them. I think it requires that we look for ways to involve more people.”

The move comes as JFAC also plans to hold unprecedented joint budget hearings with the House and Senate education and health and welfare committees in the coming session – two areas that make up the largest chunks of the state budget and where budgets are expected to be painfully tight.

Last year, two North Idaho representatives, Eric Anderson, R-Priest Lake, and House Education Chairman Bob Nonini, R-Coeur d'Alene, introduced legislation late in the session to crimp the authority of the joint budget committee to set policy or change laws – a role usually reserved for the subject-matter committees in each house. As JFAC made sweeping budget cuts, it had to temporarily suspend various state laws through its budget bills to make the cuts legal.

The Anderson-Nonini bill didn't advance, but Cameron said legislative budget writers heard the message.

Anderson on Friday hailed the new approach. “I think it's a really, really important step forward to basically have better access and a better review,” he said. “Hopefully it runs smoothly. Honestly, I don't want to make their work any more difficult, but I think it does answer some questions that we raised. I'm very proud of them for doing that.”

The public hearing on the fiscal year 2012 schools budget will run from 8-11 a.m. on Jan. 21 in the Capitol auditorium; people who want to speak will have three minutes apiece. On Jan. 28, similar rules will be in effect for the public hearing on 2012 funding for health and welfare programs, which also will run from 8-11 a.m.

Like all JFAC proceedings, the hearings will be streamed live on the Internet. Sen. John Goedde, R-Coeur d'Alene, the Senate Education Committee chairman, said, “I think it's a healthy thing to do.” He noted that his committee took public testimony on school funding cuts last year. “I thought we got some pretty good input – so it can be done.”