

# IMPulse

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**Idaho Press-Tribune**

Nampa, Idaho

**Sunday Jan. 8, 2017**

**by Chuck Malloy**

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## **EDITORIAL: Transportation, education top our legislative wish list**

Time and again during the election campaign and after, our legislators have said that making improvements on the Interstate 84 traffic bottleneck through Canyon County was a top priority for them. Sen. Patti Anne Lodge of Huston, the senior member of the delegation, has said the I-84 mess was one of the reasons she switched from Health and Welfare to the Transportation Committee.

We applaud her for requesting the change, and especially her reasons. Now, we challenge her and other members of the Canyon County delegation, to use this year's session — which is scheduled to start on Monday — to make headway on the issue.

The need is for widening the highway from Franklin Boulevard in Nampa all the way through Caldwell. We recognize there may need to be phases, and widening between Franklin Boulevard and Karcher Road is a good start. But let's have a committed plan to finish the job all the way to Caldwell. This is a big issue for Canyon County, but hardly a local "pork-barrel" project. Thousands of people travel through this section, and not everyone is from Canyon County. The interest in fixing the roadway goes far beyond the 2C borders.

Rep. Rick Youngblood of Nampa, a member of the House Transportation and Defense Committee, says bluntly, "Something has to be done. The bottom line is that the area is not safe." One option he's exploring is through the GARVEE program, which could put I-84 improvements high on the priority list. He should forge ahead with this plan.

Lodge and Youngblood give Canyon County an effective one-two punch on the germane committees in their respective chambers. Youngblood also serves as a vice chairman of the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee, which sets the state budget. But they are not the only members of the delegation serving in positions of influence. Two members are in leadership positions. Rep. Brent Crane is the House assistant majority leader, and Todd Lakey is the Senate's majority caucus chairman. Freshman Sen. Jeff Agenbroad of Nampa and Sen. Abby Lee of Fruitland, whose district includes part of Canyon County, also serve on the budget committee.

Gone are the bad-old days when Canyon County legislators were little more than automatic "no" votes on almost everything. This newer batch of legislators is plenty conservative overall but realizes the obligation of meeting the 21st century needs and their constituents and the state.

Still, getting funding for I-84 — and convincing most of the Legislature to agree to it — is a tough sell for even the best of legislators. But this issue should be front and center with our delegation, and talk needs to turn into action.

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Here are some other things we would like to see this session:

**The state's budget surplus.** It's going to be a tough session, although a projected revenue surplus of more than \$130 million suggests otherwise. Lawmakers should adopt a balanced approach — continuing the progress made in recent years on education and funding projects that have been neglected for the last decade because of lack of funding. But the session should not be about more spending. Some of that money should be set aside in reserve, or “rainy-day” accounts. Stashing away money may not score a lot of political points, but we have learned from experience that reserve accounts can be a savior to the state during lean economic times.

**Tax cuts.** It's not on Gov. Butch Otter's radar, nor should it be. Tax cuts that are used for the purpose of starving state government does not equate to an effective tax policy.

**Education.** We side with Gov. Butch Otter and the top Republican legislative leaders on this one. Funding levels have improved in recent sessions, but Idaho is only at 2009 levels for funding. Meanwhile, local school districts are continuing to ask taxpayers for supplemental levies to keep their operations going. That trend won't end even if the Legislature puts every dime of its \$130 million surplus into K-12. But better funding from the state would help curtail the onslaught of levy elections.

**Higher education.** It's typically toward the bottom on the legislative priority list because of the ability of colleges and universities to raise money on their own. But sharp tuition increases increasingly are making it more difficult for Idahoans to afford college. The Legislature's budget should reflect a strong commitment to higher education, and a strong level of funding for community colleges such as the College of Western Idaho. It's no secret that higher education holds a key to the Gem State's economic future, and a potential break from Idaho's reputation as a low-wage state. Labor experts tell us that about 5,000 high-paying jobs are out there waiting to be filled, but our higher education system is not providing the tools needed to fill those positions.

**Closing the health-care gap for working poor.** Idahoans who are left without health insurance should be another high priority for the Legislature. Lawmakers failed to act on the gap issue last year despite the governor's effort to implement a modest “Idaho solution,” and the matter was relegated to an interim committee — which also failed to come up with a concrete solution. So the issue is back with the full body of the Legislature, where it started. One idea from the summer committee came from Sen. Marv Hagedorn of Meridian, who suggested taking federal Medicaid expansion for two years, giving the state more time to develop another plan. That plan is not likely to go anywhere, given the desire by Republicans to repeal Obamacare. But at least Hagedorn offered something. Now, it's up to the Legislature to come up with something else. Another session of doing nothing on the gap issue would be an embarrassment for this Legislature.

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