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May the odds be in your favor: the 2016 Legislative session

Idaho's legislative session begins Jan. 11, and House and Senate leaders have been managing expectations throughout December. It's an election year, and not all incumbents up for re-election will be willing to tackle some of the most complex issues facing our state before heading back to their districts to campaign.

That doesn't change that there are some big issues needing to be handled. Below is our wish list for the top three matters we hope to see resolved this winter, and the general odds we'll get satisfactory resolutions.:

1. Either accept federal Affordable Care Act Medicaid expansion, or fund a workable alternative for Idahoans in the "Medicaid Gap." Odds:

- ... that Idaho will finally adopt "Obamacare" and insure 78,000 or so Idahoans who make too much to qualify for Medicaid, but who can't afford insurance? Slim to none.
- ... that Idaho will fund an alternative Medicaid-like health insurance for the working poor? 50-50
- ... that we'll end up with an excellent state-funded alternative to fully expanded Medicaid? Zero

Back in November, we got a first glance at what Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter and his administration thought Idaho could afford to offer as a Medicaid expansion alternative. It was, at best, underwhelming. At worst, the basic preventative care-only plan could trick voters into believing the problem has been fixed to the best of our state's ability, when really it's like putting a Band-Aid on a broken arm. Idaho's working poor deserve better.

2. Stop ignoring Idaho's Constitution and our Supreme Court, and fund free public education.

In 2005, the Idaho Supreme Court ruled our state isn't properly funding public schools. The plan to fix the problem put forth by the courts was rejected by the state, and the Supreme Court said as long as the state came up with another alternative, they were fine with throwing out their solution. Then? Nothing.

Even with teacher lay-offs, cuts to programming from sports to advanced placement classes, and schools across the state scaling back to four day weeks, districts still had to find cash somewhere. Many turned to fees to help pay for programs they otherwise wouldn't be able to fund. But in November, the West Ada School District was ordered by the Supreme Court to stop charging fees for free public education, putting the entire fee-based stop-gap measure in jeopardy.

What we need — besides more money for the state education system, as ruled by the Supreme Court — is some hard work on finding a reliable way to pay for our education system. Odds:

- ... that we'll come up with a better school funding formula in 2016? Slim to none.

- ... that the Legislature will throw more cash from our 2015 tax surplus into the statewide school budget?
Good to excellent.

Senate Pro Tem Brent Hill, R-Rexburg, said in December that we'll likely see an increase of \$100 million in the state education budget. That would be a step in the right direction, since it's another increase on top of a 7.4 percent increase made in 2015.

3. Add.The.Words.

This could be one of the stickiest issues of the legislative session for the third year in a row.

The "Add the Words" campaign gained momentum in 2014 when more than 100 people were arrested in Boise during protests calling for a hearing on a bill that would add the words "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" to Idaho's Human Rights Act. In the 2015 session, on a 6-1 vote, the Idaho Legislature's leadership committee finally introduced a bill, but it was defeated along party lines.

Senate Pro Tem Hill and other legislators hope this year to make both religious conservatives and Idaho's LGBT community happy, and have been working on a compromise that would "add the right words."

"Nobody should be able to deny service just because of someone's sexual orientation," Hill said. "I think most legislators have a desire to provide protection, but there are some real fears about religious liberty." Odds:

- ... that the words "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" will join race, religion, country of origin, age, sex, and disability as reasons an Idahoan can't be fired or kicked out of their homes, among other injustices?

This one's a real toss-up since it appears many leaders in the Legislature want to do something, but feel their hands are tied by loyalty to religious constituents who fear they'll be forced to serve customers whose lifestyles go against their religious beliefs. We can't wait to see what "right words" Sen. Hill, et. al, come up with to protect both Idaho's LGBT community, and Idaho's religious base.

Bonuses:

- Address Medicaid reimbursement rates for the developmentally disabled: The cut to reimbursement rates for companies providing in-home care to Idaho's developmentally disabled takes effect Feb. 1. We hope lawmakers will figure out a way to beat the clock in coming up with the cash to provide fair pay to workers with some of the most demanding jobs in the Medicaid health-care system, and continue uninterrupted, quality care for those who need protection from their government the most.
- Find funds to make our schools safe: In 2015, Rep. Wendy Horman, R-Idaho Falls, managed to allocate \$300,000 for an intensive school security assessment of 150 schools. Setting aside cash in 2016 to fix any vulnerabilities the study finds could continue to keep Idaho off the nation's school shootings map. We think it's worth a look.

Here's hoping our state's legislators are ready to take a gamble in an election year by using their leadership abilities rather than folding before the game gets going.

Katie Stokes