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Avoid across-the-board cuts

Recommendations from governor, experts must be considered to make smart choices in budget

With plans to trim millions of dollars from the state budget, it's tempting for lawmakers to call for across-the-board cuts of a particular percentage rather than a more surgical approach.

With so many agencies suffering from several previous reductions, it's more important than ever for the Legislature to make careful financial decisions tailored for each department. Further, Gov. Butch Otter and agency heads must have flexibility to determine how to best deal with the reduced revenue.

Although it seems fair to cut all agencies the same, the opposite holds true.

Some departments have experienced a dramatic rise in the need for their services because of the deep recession. Officials will need to take that into account. Education cuts could cost the state even more in the future. On the other hand, other agencies may be in a better position to weather the storm without as much of a direct impact on Idaho citizens.

In his State of the State address to lawmakers, Otter looked upon local school districts for their specific ideas on how to best achieve the savings, including their discretionary use of local reserve accounts and — in extreme cases — advances in future state funding.

That's a good idea. It's also worth considering other ways to provide flexibility for small school districts that may find another round of cuts difficult to achieve without hurting students' education.

Realizing the importance of community colleges in these times, Otter agreed to recommend funding to handle the enrollment growth at the College of Western Idaho. Some critical programs such as these need smaller percentage reductions, and Otter's budget has wisely recognized that factor.

It's difficult session ahead. And Rep. Steve Kren, R-Nampa, summed up its main focus for the Idaho Press-Tribune: "This session will be defined and judged by what programs and budgets get cut."

That's very true. The wisdom of the experts in government agencies and local school districts, vetted by the governor and his advisers, will result in the best decisions.

Lawmakers should steer clear of any idea to merely cut spending across-the-board and instead combine their duty to set the state budget with input from the executive branch to make smart choices.