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## Senator Cook's Weekly Update 3/17 to 3/21

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WEEKLY NEWSLETTER

March 21st, 2025

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## This past week...

Here's a look at what's been happening at the Capitol this week:

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## House Bill 322: Investing in Justice



[\(Click here for more bill information\)](#)

This week, the Idaho Senate passed House Bill 322, and I proudly voted in favor. This bill makes a critical investment in Idaho's judiciary by increasing judicial salaries – a step that is long overdue and essential to preserving the integrity of our courts.

## What Does House Bill 322 Do?

House Bill 322 provides a much-needed salary increase of **\$17,000**, 10% to 11.5%, bringing their pay to:

- **Supreme Court Justices:** \$186,508
- **Court of Appeals Judges:** \$178,508
- **District Judges:** \$172,508
- **Magistrate Judges:** \$164,508

These raises are roughly a 10% to 11.5% increase and help narrow the significant pay gap. Yet, Idaho judges will still earn considerably less than their peers in other states; as well as public and private legal professionals within Idaho. This bill is a necessary first step in addressing the judiciary's concerns.

## Why Does This Matter?

Every Idahoan has a constitutional right to due process. That means when you go to court – whether for a criminal case, family matter, or business dispute – you deserve a judge who is experienced, impartial, and highly qualified.

But we are losing those judges and struggling to recruit new ones

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Idaho **ranks dead last** in Supreme Court justice pay (**50th** of 50 states). We **rank 48th** (out of 50) for district judge pay.

While other legal salaries have risen, judicial pay has lagged behind, making it harder to attract and retain top legal minds.

## The Recruitment Crisis

Five years ago, district judge openings attracted an average of 11 applicants. Last year, that number dropped to just 4.6; sometimes as low as 3, the legal minimum for consideration by the Governor.

At the same time, judges are stepping down for higher-paying private practice or other legal positions. Between FY2024 and FY2025, seven judges left for financial reasons. Many of the best-qualified attorneys in Idaho won't even apply for judgeships. The number one reason they give? Low pay.

## It's a Market – and We're Losing

Judicial compensation exists in a competitive job market. Idaho judges aren't just competing with judges in other states – they're competing with other legal jobs right here in Idaho. Right now, we're losing that competition.

Idaho judges earn far less than many legal professionals. For example:

- **The Dean of the University of Idaho College of Law:** \$130,000 more than a Supreme Court Justice
- **An Ada County prosecutor:** \$42,000 more
- **Some Deputy Attorneys General:** Make more than our judges

We ask a lot from our judges while offering them far less than their peers.

## A Personal Perspective

Senator Treg Bernt recently shadowed a district judge in Ada County. He had an “eye-opening” experience as he saw firsthand the high volume, legal complexity, and intense emotional weight of the cases they handle. As he put it:

*"I watched back-to-back sentencing hearings – an intense workload, high stakes, and emotional weight. Our judges are the frontline of justice, ensuring fairness for victims, defendants, and families. They deserve our support – and a salary that reflects their role."*

## What's Next?

This \$17,000 raise is a modest but meaningful step. It won't fully close the pay gap, but it signals that we value our judges and are serious about retaining top legal talent.

As a member of the Idaho Senate, I will continue advocating for policies that:

- Strengthen our courts
- Protect constitutional rights
- Keep Idaho's justice system fair and effective

This isn't just about money. It's about preserving the rule of law, respecting those who uphold it, and ensuring every Idahoan has access to a qualified judge when it matters most.

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## Senate Joint Memorial 101 – Working Together for Idaho's Water Future

[\(Click here to read full bill\)](#)

### Bipartisan Support for SJM 101

Last month, I presented **Senate Joint Memorial 101 (SJM 101)** on the Senate floor, where it passed unanimously; demonstrating Idahoans' shared commitment to water security. This week, Representative Rod Furniss presented it to the **House**, where it again passed **unanimously**. In today's political climate, that kind of unity is rare.

### What Does SJM 101 Do?

SJM 101 urges action from:

- Congress
- The President
- Agencies like the Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and Idaho Department of Water Resources

We're asking for studies and support for new or expanded water storage projects, including:

- **Reconstruction of the Teton Dam**
- **Expansion at Minidoka and Jackson Lake Dams**

### Why Water Storage Matters

In Spring 2024, many wells in eastern Idaho were shut off, leaving farmers without water for crops. An estimated **71,000 acre-feet of additional storage** could have prevented those shut-offs.

This isn't just infrastructure—it's about:

- Water security.
- Agricultural sustainability.
- Protecting rural communities

## A Personal Perspective

While presenting to the House, Rep. Rod Furniss shared his experience. He was 16 when the **Teton Dam failed in 1976**, submerging his family's farm and destroying their irrigation systems.

*"I heard the dam fail – a haunting screech. A railroad track half a mile from our home twisted like a slinky."*

That firsthand experience of devastation is why he strongly supports rebuilding the dam.

## The Path Forward

Reliable water storage is essential for:

- Supporting agriculture
- Protecting communities
- Providing affordable power
- Expanding recreation opportunities



To move this forward, I've reached out to:

- Governor Brad Little
- Senators Jim Risch & Mike Crapo
- Congressman Mike Simpson

Together, we're working to turn momentum into **real, lasting action**.

## We Need Action, Not Just Studies

With a **growing population and increasing drought risks**, Idaho's farmers and communities need long-term water solutions.

## Final Word

*Water is life in Idaho. Let's store it, Let's protect it. And let's plan ahead; together*

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## House Bill 282 : Homestead Exemption Reform Passes Unanimously

## Senate Education Committee

[\(Click here for more bill information\)](#)

The Idaho Senate has unanimously passed House Bill



282. This is a smart, compassionate update to our laws that will make a big difference for Idaho families.

## What Is the Homestead Exemption?

The homestead exemption **protects up to \$175,000 of a home's value** from bankruptcy or court-ordered debt collection, ensuring people aren't left without shelter during financial hardship.



## What HB 282 Does Not Do

This bill does **not** affect your property tax homeowner's exemption – the one that reduces your tax bill. HB 282 only applies in situations like bankruptcy or when debts are being collected by the courts.

## Fixing an Unfair Rule for Married Couples

Previously, married couples had to **share** the \$175,000 exemption, while **unmarried individuals each received the full amount**. This was an unfair "marriage penalty" that left families vulnerable. HB 282 fixes this by allowing each spouse to claim their own \$175,000 exemption, just like every other exemption in Idaho law.

## A Fairer Rule for Bankruptcy

Under current law, people who sell their homes during bankruptcy are expected to reinvest the proceeds within a year. A tough challenge when bankruptcy destroys credit and you can't qualify for a new mortgage.

**HB 282 removes this requirement**, providing flexibility for those facing financial recovery.

## Why This Matters

This bill **protects Idahoans in crisis**, ensuring families aren't penalized for being married or forced out of their homes due to unexpected financial hardship. HB 282 is a bipartisan fix that puts families first and corrects a long-standing flaw in Idaho law.

## Thank You

A sincere thank you to my colleagues in both chambers for their unanimous support. This is proof of what we can achieve when we focus on practical solutions with real impact.

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## A Strong Addition to Idaho Parks and Recreation

This week, the Idaho Senate unanimously confirmed Courtney Liddiard to the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation.



Parks and Recreation Board, with his term running through June 30, 2030.

A respected Idaho leader, Courtney brings a history of service and a passion for preserving our state's natural spaces. His appointment comes at a crucial time as Idaho grows and we work to protect the outdoor heritage that makes our state unique.



Senator Doug Ricks, who presented his nomination, praised Courtney's integrity, warmth, and ability to connect with people from all walks of life. I was proud to vote in support of his confirmation.

Courtney recently retired after 22 years as CEO of Ball Ventures, where he led major projects like Snake River Landing, Sandcreek Commons, and the Mountain America Center. Under his leadership, Ball Ventures expanded from a small family office to a major investment firm operating in 17 states across multiple industries.

Beyond business, Courtney is deeply committed to public service. He worked for U.S. Senator Orrin Hatch early in his career and has since served on Blue Cross of Idaho's Board (as Vice Chair), Regional Economic Development for Eastern Idaho, and Idaho Leaders United, where he has championed civility, unity, and constitutional principles.

Courtney's entrepreneurial mindset, strategic leadership, and dedication to Idaho make him a strong advocate for our parks and recreation system. I have no doubt he will bring fresh energy and vision to the board.

Please join me in congratulating **Mr. Courtney Liddiard** on his appointment. I look forward to seeing the great work he'll do for Idaho's parks, trails, and outdoor spaces in the years ahead.

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## A Win for Idaho Homeowners: House Bill 354 Passes the Senate

[\(Click here for more bill information\)](#)

This week, the Idaho Senate unanimously passed House Bill 354 (34-0), a key step toward a fairer, more consistent, and transparent property tax system. This bill puts Idaho homeowners and taxpayers first.



### What House Bill 354 Does

#### 1. Fairer Property Tax Appeals

## 1. Fairer Property Tax Appeals

Currently, homeowners bear the burden of proof when appealing their property tax assessment. This can be difficult when property values suddenly jump. House Bill 354 changes that:

If an assessment **rises more than 10%** and the county assessor **does not follow proper methods**, the burden shifts to the assessor to justify the increase. This ensures **assessments are accurate and fair** and so homeowners aren't left paying for someone else's mistake.

## 2. Consistent Homeowner's Exemption Rules

Counties have applied homeowner's exemptions differently, especially when a property transitions from a rental to a primary residence. This inconsistency led to confusion and frustration for many homeowners.

House Bill 354 fixes this by requiring all 44 counties and the Idaho State Tax Commission to use a single, clear formula based on: Levy rate, home value and days lived in the home during the year

## Why This Matters

Though technical, these changes have real impacts on Idaho families by providing:

- Transparency – Clearer property tax assessments
- Predictability – More consistent tax rules statewide
- Fairness – Homeowners are treated equally, and assessors are held accountable

**This is a win for taxpayers and good governance. I was proud to support House Bill 354 and will keep working for fair, responsible, and easy-to-navigate tax laws.**

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## Standing Up for Free Speech on Idaho's College Campuses



[\(Click here for more House Bill 240 information\)](#)

This week, I had the honor of presenting House Bill 240 – the Protecting Campus Free Speech in Higher Education Act – to the full Senate. After thoughtful debate, it passed 26-6 and now heads to the Governor's desk to be signed into law.

## What Does HB 240 Do?

## **Protects First Amendment Rights**

Ensures that students, faculty, staff, and guests at Idaho's public colleges have full First Amendment protections — freedom of speech, religion, press, association, and petition. These freedoms don't stop once you cross over the edge of campus.

## **Ends "Free Speech Zones"**

Some campuses created limited "free speech zones," where students could speak freely — but only in those small areas. This bill eliminates restrictive "free speech zones", affirming that students can speak freely in any open, outdoor area of campus, as long as it doesn't disrupt others' rights.

## **Protects Student Organizations**

Prevents student groups from being punished or denied recognition due to their political, religious, or philosophical beliefs. Also ensures they can set their own membership and leadership requirements.

## **Promotes Education and Awareness**

Requires universities to provide clear information on free speech rights in student handbooks, websites, and orientation programs. Staff, administrators, and campus police must also receive training on upholding these rights.

## **Ensures Accountability**

Colleges must report any incidents of free speech violations to the State Board of Education and the Legislature, ensuring transparency and fairness.

## **Provides Legal Protection**

Allows individuals to **take legal action** if their free speech rights are violated. However, data from other states shows that clear laws like this reduce lawsuits because they prevent misunderstandings and prevent conflicts before they escalate.

## **Why This Bill Matters**

A few years ago, I saw similar bills as too much — a sledgehammer on a delicate issue. But instead of focusing on what it restricted, I asked: *What does this bill protect?* As I listened, learned, and worked with those affected, the answer became clear: our students, our universities, and the fundamental freedoms that define higher education.

This bill was shaped with direct input from Idaho's colleges and universities. In fact, Boise State University had over 90% of its recommendations included in the final bill. This bill is not an attack on higher education, it's a thoughtful, balanced partnership to protect free speech for all.

This is not a partisan issue. Free speech isn't about left or right — it's about ensuring



that adoption records impact real lives, real families, and real emotions. For her and so many others, this bill represents hope, healing, and the possibility of connection.

I proudly voted **YES** on HB 47. This isn't about forcing reunions—it's about fairness, dignity, and the right to understand one's own past.

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## Idaho Students Head to Microsoft Office National Championship

I'm incredibly proud of Idaho's students, schools, and educators! This June, six outstanding high school students will represent our state at the **Microsoft Office Specialist U.S. National Championship** in Dallas, Texas. These students earned top scores on their qualifying exams, placing them among the best in the nation.



This competition challenges students to master Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint beyond the basics—essential tools in today's classrooms, businesses, and organizations. It's a testament to their technical skills, dedication, and drive to go beyond the classroom.

### Join me in congratulating our talented Idaho representatives:

#### Microsoft Excel®

- Ryker Spangler – Rigby High School
- Hunter Burkett – Parma High School

#### Microsoft PowerPoint®

- Payne Brown – Lewiston High School
- Rachel Thurgood – Compass Public Charter School, Meridian

#### Microsoft Word®

- Caroline Powell – Canyon Ridge High School, Twin Falls
- Tanner Powell – Murtaugh Joint School District

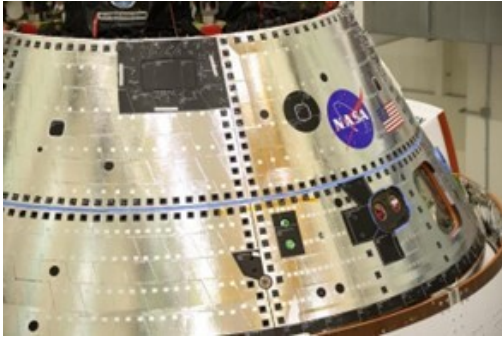
These students' achievements wouldn't be possible without dedicated teachers and supportive school communities. Idaho's educators are doing exceptional work to prepare students for the future; not just academically, but with practical, career-ready skills. Programs like this, which emphasize digital literacy and real-world

applications, help students gain confidence and discover new opportunities.

This is a shining example of what's possible when students are challenged and supported. Thank you to the schools, teachers, and families who have helped these students succeed!

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## One of Idaho's Own is Headed to NASA!



I'm thrilled to share some exciting news that showcases the incredible talent in Idaho's schools. **Scott Slonim**, a technology and STEM teacher at Ernest Hemingway STEAM School in Blaine County, has been selected for the prestigious **2025 NASA LiftOff Summer Institute** at the Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas!

This highly competitive, week-long program, hosted by NASA's Texas Space Grant Consortium, brings together outstanding 5th–12th grade teachers from across the country. Participants receive hands-on training, exclusive access to NASA facilities, and the opportunity to collaborate with top scientists and engineers shaping the future of space exploration.

Scott's selection is a testament to the exceptional educators we have in Idaho. His dedication to STEM education and inspiring students to think big is truly remarkable. Through this experience, he'll bring back cutting-edge knowledge, innovative teaching strategies, and real-world space science that will ignite curiosity and excitement in his classroom and beyond.

Opportunities like this don't just enrich a single classroom – they create a ripple effect, sparking curiosity, encouraging innovation, and preparing students for careers in science, technology, engineering, and math.

I had the chance to watch Scott's application video, and I encourage you to check it out: [Watch Scott's NASA Application Video](#)

Please join me in congratulating Scott on this incredible achievement. Let's continue to celebrate and support Idaho's educators as they inspire the next generation of scientists, engineers, and explorers!

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## Coming up next week...

[H 368](#) – This bill was heard in Senate Education this week and then sent to the 14th order to be amended. We should hear it on the floor this coming week.

JFAC to set the following budgets:

1. State Public Defender
2. College & Universities
3. Office of the Governor
4. Department of Finance – **Failed on the House floor**
5. State Liquor – **Failed on Senate floor**
6. Department of Health and Welfare for the Division of Behavioral Health – **Failed on the House floor**
7. Department of Health and Welfare for the Divisions of Indirect Support and Licensing and Certification – **Failed on House floor**
8. Trailer Bills and other remaining action

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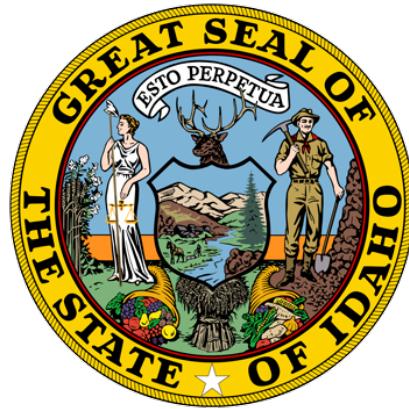
It's an honor to serve you, and I always welcome your thoughts and feedback. Please don't hesitate to reach out. Together, we can continue strengthening Idaho's future.

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## Sen Kevin Cook

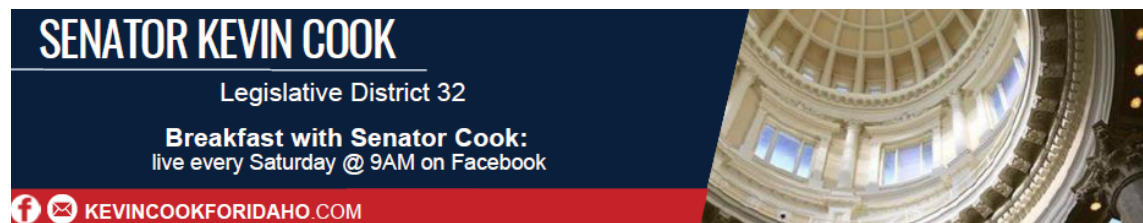
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- [Facebook page](#)
- Breakfast with Senator Cook: Live on Facebook: 9 AM Saturday



### Committees:

- Education
- Finance
- Resources & Environment



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