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Senator Cook's Weekly Update 1/27 - 1/31

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WEEKLY NEWSLETTER

February 5th, 2025

Senator Kevin Cook - District 32

This past week

As we move into the 2025 legislative session, there's plenty to report! Here's a look at what's been happening at the Capitol this week:

Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee

This week in JFAC, we heard budget presentations from Idaho's universities, but no votes were taken.

Budget presentations:

Boise State University

Boise State President Marlene Tromp presented the university's 2026 budget request of **\$309.3 million**. She faced tough questions regarding Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs, with some legislators feeling she avoided directly answering.

Boise State's ongoing legal battle with Big City Coffee was also addressed. The lawsuit stems from allegations that Boise State pushed the company off campus due to the owner's vocal support of law enforcement. The university has spent **\$1.5 million** on legal fees over the past four years. President Tromp assured the committee that those fees were paid with funds from interest income, not taxpayer dollars. She also confirmed that Boise State plans to appeal the court ruling, which awarded **\$4 million** to Big City Coffee's former owner.

Idaho State University (ISU)

President Robert Wagner, who joined from Utah State University and has been in his role for just one year (Jan. 2024), presented ISU's **\$177.2 million** budget request.

He was questioned about the mishandling of **\$900,000** given in 2022, to build a regional forensic pathology center. ISU transferred the funds to Bannock County, but only **\$53,000** was spent before the county withdrew from the project in August 2023. ISU never attempted to recover the remaining funds. President Wagner acknowledged the university mishandled the money and pledged the university would follow legislative spending directives more carefully moving forward.

University of Idaho

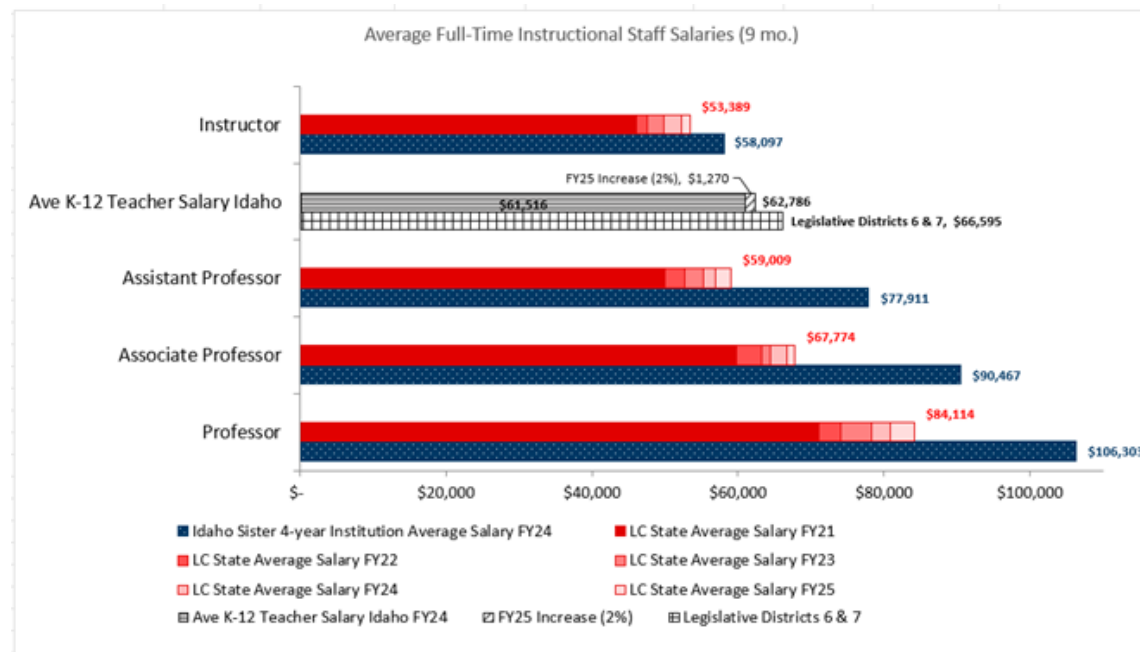
President C. Scott Green presented the university's **\$210.2 million budget** request.

The committee pressed him on DEI-related programs and the proposed acquisition of the University of Phoenix. President Green assured the committee that legislative approval would be required before any acquisition moves forward. He also reassured the committee that the university is financially protected by a **\$20 million** "breakup fee" should the deal not go through.

Lewis-Clark State College

President Cynthia Pemberton presented a budget request of **\$44.1 million**. Her presentation focused on addressing faculty and staff salaries. She highlighted that Lewis-Clark faculty salaries lag behind local K-12 teacher pay, and emphasized the need for increased funding in order to retain quality educators.

The college is seeking **\$288,000** in discretionary funding for salaries and benefits, though **\$1.2 million** is needed to bring faculty pay to the median level. President Pemberton put it simply: "I just want us to catch up *a little bit*."



Change in Employee Compensation (CEC):

On Friday, the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee (JFAC) continued discussions on pay raises for state employees, but unfortunately, no final decision was reached. The main debate remains: *should raises be across-the-board or based on merit?*

This is the second time in recent weeks that the committee has failed to reach an agreement. The Idaho Division of Human Resources previously recommended a **4% salary increase** for state employees, but JFAC must determine a fair and fiscally responsible way to distribute these raises.

Procedural Challenges & Rule Confusion

1. Procedural Challenges & Rule Confusion

While the debate over compensation was already complex, much of Friday's meeting was delayed due to confusion over committee rules.

Voting Procedures: Issues over how members can vote when multiple motions are on the table. Here's how the scenario played out:

- **Motion 1:** Introduced by Committee Member 1.
- **Motion 2:** An alternative proposed by another member.
- **Motion 3:** A substitute motion introduced.

Under committee rules, because Committee Member #1 proposed Motion 1, they cannot vote on Motion 2 or 3 unless they first withdraw the motion. Twice on Friday, a motion maker voted for a different motion without withdrawing their own. This led to objections, forcing the committee to pause and clarify the process before proceeding.

Defining a Majority: The meeting also hit a roadblock over how to define a majority vote. With **20 voting members present**, a majority is **11 votes**. But as the meeting dragged on, members left the room for other commitments and we dropped to **15 members** present. Some argued that the new majority should be **8 votes**, while others insisted it should remain at **11**. Believe it or not, we calculated the majority both ways on two different votes!

The Clear Need for Rules

Friday's JFAC meeting made one thing very clear: we need clear, enforceable committee rules; otherwise we risk hindering Idaho's progress with delays and confusion. For the past two years, House leadership has pushed back against adopting rules, failing to vote on and accept them. However, this meeting made it painfully obvious how necessary clear procedures are to ensure smooth and efficient decision-making progress.

It was a stressful meeting, filled with stops, turns, and bumps along the way – but I remain committed to pushing for clear rules and efficient processes.

Education Committee

This week, the Senate Education Committee reviewed several gubernatorial appointments, proposed changes to Idaho's education standards, including graduation requirements and Social Science content standards.

Public Charter School Commission Reappointment

The committee considered Sherrilynn Bair for reappointment to the Idaho Public Charter School Commission. I asked her a key question:

"What can we learn from charter schools, and how can we apply those lessons to traditional public schools?"

She noted that while the competition between charter and public schools has created unnecessary tension, it's possible to apply these lessons to public schools. She emphasized that both types of schools can and should learn from one another.

Sherrilynn Bair is a rock star! The committee had a great discussion with her.

New Legislation: Mobile Device Policy

Senator Bernt introduced RS 32029, which allows school districts to develop their own mobile device policies. Some schools already require students to check in their phones at the start of the day and check them out at the end. For example, last week a Boise high teacher shared their result to this creative approach of handling cell phones. The result? A more vibrant school environment! Lunchtime is filled with conversations, students play board games, and the overall energy is more positive. It was inspiring to see what a small change can do!

This bill gives local school districts the power to set their own rules on classroom phone use based on their school's unique needs. The committee unanimously approved printing the bill and holding a public hearing.

Graduation Requirements: Communications vs. Computer Technology

One of the key debates was whether to drop the required Communications credit and replace it with a Computer Technology credit. While no vote has been taken yet, I do not see this change passing. As stated in previous newsletters, I believe both computer technology and communication skills are important. Communication skills are critical for success in the workforce, civic engagement, and everyday life. Replacing this requirement could have long-term impacts on students' ability to express themselves effectively.

Social Science Content Standards

A heated discussion arose regarding the new history standards. Some argued that the updated standards portray Native Americans as victims and white settlers as oppressors.

Here's where I stand:

I love history. History should be told as it is — the good, the bad, and the ugly. America's past includes slavery, land disputes, and injustices — it can be unpleasant, but we must teach it in order to learn from it and build a better future. I do not believe in reparations; no one today should be held responsible for the actions of past generations. However, I do believe in learning from the past, remembering it, and moving forward to make our country even stronger.

Model School Facility Committee

On January 20th, 2025 the Senate Resource and Environment Committee convened to review several legislative proposals and Gubernatorial appointments. The legislations aimed at improving resource management and public services. Each proposal was approved to move forward in the legislative process. The committee also approved the Gubernatorial reappointments of Linda Mitchell and Craig Hill to the Lake Pend Orielle Basin Commission and Dean Stevenson and Marc Gibbs to the Idaho Water Resource Board. Appointees shared their concerns about transparency decision-making by the Idaho Water Resource Board were acknowledged, with committees to improvement.

The goal of this committee is to develop a standardized school facility design that incorporates best practices in safety, efficiency, and functionality – a blueprint that can be replicated across the state to save time and taxpayer money.

This week, I met with:

- **Mike Munger** – Program Manager, Idaho Office of School Safety & Security
- **Guy Bliesner** – Idaho School Board Safety & Security Analyst
- **Brandon Payne** – Executive Director, Education Management Consultant

At first, this **felt like an overwhelming task** – like trying to eat an elephant. The big question was: *Where do I even start?*

After thoughtful discussion, we agreed that the **first step** is to **gather standard best practice requirements** for school design.

For example:

- **How much square footage per student** is needed in an **elementary, middle, or high school**?
- **What safety features** should be incorporated into every design?
- **How can we build efficiently** while maintaining **quality learning environments**?

This is just the beginning, but I'm excited to **help create a model school design** that can serve communities **across Idaho for years to come**. I'll keep you updated as we make progress!

Idaho Energy Caucus

The Idaho Energy Caucus met this week over lunch, that was provided by INL. Dr. John C. Wagner, Director of the Idaho National Laboratory (INL), provided an insightful overview of INL's ongoing efforts in nuclear energy research and development. He emphasized the laboratory's role in advancing nuclear technologies to ensure safe, reliable, and sustainable energy solutions for our nation. A key focus

was on the development of advanced reactor designs, aimed to enhance safety features, improve efficiency, and reduce waste.

In addition to energy production, Dr. Wagner highlighted INL's contributions to national security. The laboratory is actively involved in projects that protect our nation's critical infrastructure and bolster defense capabilities. This includes cybersecurity measures and the development of technologies to safeguard our energy systems against potential threats

Coming up next week

Senate Reading Calendar

On **Monday, February 3, 2025**, the Senate will convene at 11:00 A.M. to consider several gubernatorial appointments, including:

- **Lori Wolff** as the Administrator of the Division of Financial Management.
- **Christine Starr** as the Executive Director of the Commission of Pardons and Parole.
- **Mary Martin** to the Commission of Pardons and Parole.
- **Craig Hill** and **Linda Mitchell** to the Lake Pend Oreille Basin Commission.
- **Marc Gibbs** to the Idaho Water Resource Board.
- **Brigadier General Timothy J. Donnellan** as the Adjutant General of the Idaho Military Division.
- **Dale McOmber** to the State Building Authority.

Bills scheduled to debated on the Senate floor

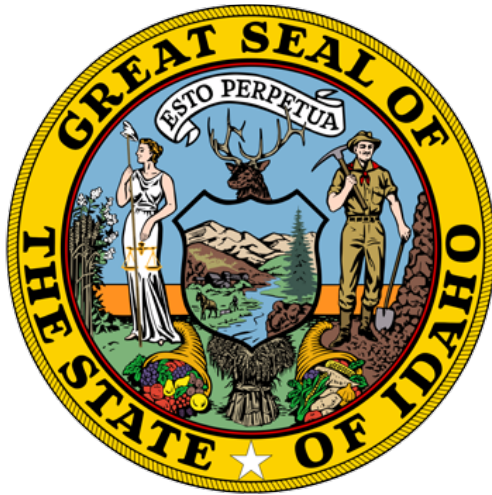
S 1014: Sponsored by Senator Blaylock, this bill pertains to **Health and Safety**. It proposes amendments, repeals, and additions to existing law to establish procedures regarding required tests and blood specimen collection for infants and newborns.

S 1015: Also sponsored by Senator Blaylock, this bill addresses **Hospitals**. It seeks to amend, repeal, and add to existing law to revise and establish provisions regarding the licensure and inspection of hospitals.

S 1024: Sponsored by Senator VanOrden, this bill focuses on **Mental Health and Substance Use Services**. It aims to amend, repeal, and add to existing law regarding adult and children's mental health services and substance use disorder services.

I will continue to advocate for fiscally sound policies that help Idaho attract and retain a strong workforce while ensuring your tax dollars are spent wisely.

Thank you for the opportunity to represent you. Your feedback is always welcome — please feel free to reach out. Together, **we will continue to build a stronger Idaho**



Sen Kevin Cook

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Committees:


- Education
- Finance
- Resources & Environment

SENATOR KEVIN COOK

Legislative District 32

Breakfast with Senator Cook:
live every Saturday @ 9AM on Facebook

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