



## Special session – a short, ugly history

The talk around town is that the special legislative session scheduled to convene May 8 will range far beyond issues of economic development and sale of the Montana Power Company. The word is this session will cut taxes or rebate the state's so-called "surplus."

If so, once again into the breach we ride, and we will suffer many casualties.

No fooling, in the last 15 years, special legislative sessions that have dealt with public schools or taxes or both have hammered public schools hard. Sessions in 1986, 1989, and 1993 – followed by parsimonious, even hostile regular legislatures – banged away at our public school systems.

In 1986, Governor Ted Schwinden convened a special session to address an unanticipated plunge in state revenue when Montana's natural resource industries went south. For the first time in history, the '86 special session trimmed away half of the entitlement increases in school funding the 1985 regular legislature had appropriated, and spent half of the then \$90 million education trust (yes, education's own coal-tax generated trust) to cover a yawning deficit. Six months later for the first time in history, the 1987 regular legislative session failed to increase state funding of entitlements and spent the remaining half of the now defunct education trust. \$90 million gone forever.

In 1989, following Governor Stan Stephens' veto of our school funding bill in the regular legislature, a special session convened to address the supreme court's conclusion that gross inequities in per pupil expenditures were unconstitutional. Regrettably, the funding remedy the '89 special session adopted never reached adequacy yet nearly doubled the mandated property tax mills dedicated to public school funding – a property tax increase that dumped fuel on the anti-property tax fire raging across Montana. If they were not already, public schools sure enough then became scapegoats for Montana's flawed property tax structure. The 1991 regular legislature repeated history and refused to increase state funding of entitlements.

### Adding salt to our wounds

In 1993, Governor Marc Racicot convened a special session to address a projected deficit in the state's ending fund balance. The response was to cut \$20 million out of public school funding. This

on top of a \$30 million cut we suffered in the '93 regular legislature when it designed the current – and broken – school funding formula. But the projected deficit did not materialize. Instead, the 1995 regular legislature enjoyed a small "surplus" that it rebated to income taxpayers, almost the same amount the '93 special session cut in public school funding!

Adding salt to our gaping wound, the '95 regular legislature, for the third time since 1987, failed to increase state funding of entitlements. Public schools have yet to recover from the real dollar losses in state funding inflicted in the '93 regular and special sessions.

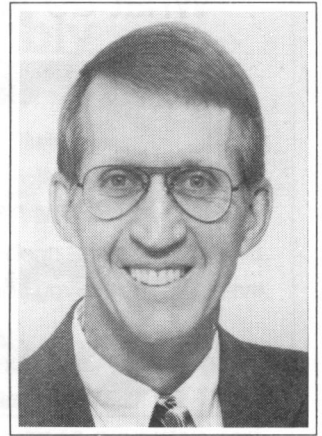
### Read our lips: no more cuts

Folks, had we no short history of special sessions followed by equally ugly regular legislatures, maybe we could buy the politically expedient or even anti-government, anti-public school rant, that taxes must be too high if state revenues seem to be greater than state needs.

But we do have history, and we don't buy the "cut-the-taxes" or "rebate-the-surplus" rhetoric. If there is a surplus (not a sure thing by the way), it has been built on 15 years of cuts in state funding of public education, cuts in state funding of our university system, cuts in state funding of competitive public employee salaries.

The past need not be prologue if we can successfully convince this extraordinary lame duck special session to leave Montana's revenue stream alone. If it does, then maybe, just maybe, we will for the first time in 15 long years have sufficient revenue to adequately fund public schools and other government programs and services.

If, on the other hand, the special session engages in a politically opportunistic tax cutting frenzy and digs into the purported surplus, then once again history tells us to expect nothing at all in 2001. ■



BY ERIC FEAYER  
MEA PRESIDENT

---

“If there is a surplus (not a sure thing by the way), it has been built on 15 years of cuts in state funding of public education, cuts in state funding of our university system, cuts in state funding of competitive public employee salaries.”

---