

MINUTES  
**SENATE TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE**

**DATE:** Thursday, March 12, 2026

**TIME:** 1:30 P.M.

**PLACE:** Room WW53

**MEMBERS PRESENT:** Chairman Okuniewicz, Vice Chairman Keyser, Senators Burtenshaw, Hart, Adams, Galloway, Kohl, Rabe, and Semmelroth

**ABSENT/ EXCUSED:** None

**NOTE:** The sign-in sheet, testimonies and other related materials will be retained with the minutes in the committee's office until the end of the session and will then be located on file with the minutes in the Legislative Services Library.

**CONVENED:** **Chairman Okuniewicz** called the meeting of the Senate Transportation Committee (Committee) to order at 1:32 p.m.

**MINUTES APPROVAL:** **Senator Galloway** moved to approve the Minutes of February 26, 2026. **Vice Chairman Keyser** seconded the motion. The motion carried by **voice vote**.

**MINUTES APPROVAL:** **Senator Kohl** moved to approve the Minutes of March 3, 2026. **Vice Chairman Keyser** seconded the motion. The motion carried by **voice vote**.

**MINUTES APPROVAL:** **Senator Semmelroth** moved to approve the Minutes of March 5, 2026. **Senator Burtenshaw** seconded the motion. The motion carried by **voice vote**.

**S 1379** **PROJECT CHOICE PROGRAM FEE - Amends existing law to revise a provision regarding the Project Choice program fee.** **Senator Woodward** stated the Project Choice Program Fee was first established in Idaho in 2006 through legislation that created a career ladder for trooper pay. The fee applied to commissioned troopers, the forensics department, and dispatchers, with the goal of supporting recruitment and retention. The Project Choice Fee was a dedicated fee, **Senator Woodward** felt it was important to note that this fee was directly tied to those who used Idaho's highways.

**Senator Woodward** noted that the funds were not mixed with other revenues and remained dedicated to their intended purpose. This bill proposed increasing the Project Choice Program Fee, which had been set at \$3 since 2006, by \$5, bringing the total to \$8. Under the proposal, when individuals renewed their vehicle registration annually, the fee would be \$8 instead of \$3. The increase was expected to generate approximately \$10 million to support Idaho State Police (ISP) trooper pay. The reason for the proposal was that Idaho had begun falling behind in maintaining competitive pay for its troopers.

**TESTIMONY:** **Bill Gardiner**, Colonel, ISP, testified that the proposed increase to the Project Choice Fee was necessary to address significant recruitment and retention challenges within the agency. He referenced documents provided to the Committee, including organizational charts for each district, that showed authorized patrol positions and current vacancies. He explained that numerous positions were unfilled, particularly in the Lewiston district, where staffing shortages had become severe. The agency had begun temporarily sending troopers from other regions—including Idaho Falls, Pocatello, Twin Falls, and Boise—to Lewiston for week-long assignments, covering hotel and per diem costs so they could handle calls that local troopers were unable to cover due to limited staffing.

**Colonel Gardiner** stated that staffing challenges were also evident in the Idaho State Police Academy in Meridian. While academy classes typically included 20 to 25 recruits, the current class scheduled to graduate in June had only eight recruits, making it one of the smallest classes in the agency's history. He described a salary comparison analysis showing that ISP pay lagged behind other law enforcement agencies across the state. Trooper salaries began falling behind other agencies by about five years of service, with larger gaps at 10 and 15 years. He emphasized that the goal was not to make ISP the highest-paid agency in Idaho but to make it competitive. **Colonel Gardiner** explained that the agency had studied the issue over the past year after leadership encouraged a deeper analysis. A committee was formed to review the problem and identify its root cause. The analysis revealed that ISP pay had historically been funded through three sources: the State General Fund, a portion of gas tax revenue through the Highway Distribution Account, and the \$3 Project Choice Fee created about 20 years earlier. He stated that ISP was removed from the gas tax funding source, leaving only the State General Fund and the registration fee.

**Colonel Gardiner** stated that the proposal would restructure the pay system so future compensation increases would apply to the entire salary. He noted that the original proposal requested a \$9 increase to the fee, but after discussions with legislators, the request was reduced to a \$5 increase as a compromise to begin addressing the issue. He explained that this would help start correcting trooper pay immediately and sustain the system for several years, with the expectation that the Legislature could revisit the issue later once updated financial balances were known (Attachments 1, 2, and 3).

**Senator Hart** asked how the program received the name "Project Choice Fee," and whether the fee had originally been optional. **Colonel Gardiner** explained that the name "Project Choice" referred to a career ladder program for ISP troopers, which had originated about 20 years earlier. He clarified that the program was not an optional fee but was designed as an incentive-based pay structure tied to career development.

**Jason Horst**, Chairman, Idaho State Police Association, testified in support of **S 1379**. He explained he was speaking on behalf of the association, and not on behalf of the ISP, itself. He stated that when the Legislature created the Project Choice Program the goal was to establish a stable funding source to support competitive pay and improve recruitment and retention. He testified that ISP was facing significant staffing challenges as the State's population and traffic volumes had grown, while the number of troopers had not kept pace. As positions remained unfilled, the workload increased for the troopers who remained on duty. Coverage areas expanded, calls accumulated, and longer shifts placed additional pressure on existing staff. He said this led to burnout and contributed to troopers leaving for agencies offering better compensation. He concluded that updating the Project Choice Fee through **S 1379** would help support the original purpose and asked the Committee for its support.

**Leslie Lehman**, Fraternal Order of Police, North Idaho Troopers Lodge 512, testified in support of **S 1379**. She said she was concerned about the number of unfilled trooper positions and the declining number of experienced officers in patrol ranks. She explained that patrol teams in the five northern counties typically included about six troopers on duty, often with one or two corporals with 15 or more years of experience who helped train new troopers and ensured they followed law and policy. **Ms. Lehman** testified that the agency had been losing experienced commissioned officers to other agencies and the private sector, which left less experienced troopers responsible for training new recruits. She also noted that

the State invested significant resources in each trooper, including background investigations, academy training, equipment, field training, and specialized training such as collision reconstruction or commercial vehicle enforcement. She said when trained troopers left, the State lost both the investment in their training and their experience. She urged the Committee to support **S 1379** to help recruit and retain ISP troopers. **Senator Semmelroth** asked **Ms. Lehman** if she could speak to the challenges affecting troopers personally and how those challenges were impacting their families. **Ms. Lehman** explained that the staffing shortages placed a greater burden on families, as troopers often did not know whether they would face a 10- or 15-hour shift. This made it difficult to attend family events, because there was no one available to relieve them at the end of their shift.

**Blake Higley**, Idaho State Police Association, Chapter President for District 6, testified in support of **S 1379**. He explained that District 6 covered much of Eastern Idaho including heavily-traveled highways in 10 counties, where they experienced significant staffing shortages. Troopers often worked shifts with little or no backup, covering large areas for crashes, dangerous drivers, and highway assistance, leading to overtime, unused vacation, and low morale. He described a constant staffing cycle: as new troopers were hired, experienced officers moved to specialty roles, leadership positions, or left for other agencies, leaving the district short-staffed. Recruitment had become difficult; at a recent college recruiting event, top candidates declined offers, citing low pay. He concluded that **S 1379** would help the agency remain competitive in recruiting and retaining troopers.

**Brian Lovell**, Idaho Fraternal Order of Police (FOP), testified in support of **S 1379** on behalf of the organization's more than 2,800 members across city, county, state, and federal law enforcement. He explained that pay and benefits for ISP troopers had fallen behind. He noted that ISP troopers frequently assisted smaller agencies with complicated crashes or major investigations, and that mutual support between agencies helped manage limited resources. He described the proposed increase to the Project Choice Fee as a modest adjustment that would help recruit, retain, and maintain experienced ISP personnel.

**DISCUSSION:** **Senator Kohl** thanked **Senator Woodward** for the presentation and praised the professionalism of the Idaho State Patrol. He expressed concern that raising ISP pay could trigger pay increases across other law enforcement agencies, potentially leading local governments to raise property taxes. He concluded that, due to these concerns, he planned to vote no on the motion.

**MOTION:** **Senator Burtenshaw** moved to send **S 1379** to the floor with a **do pass** recommendation. **Senator Semmelroth** seconded the motion. The motion carried by **voice vote**. **Senators Hart** and **Kohl** requested to be recorded as voting nay.

**H 742** **VEHICLE TITLES - Amends existing law to provide for cancellation or discharge of an encumbrance by an Idaho vehicle dealer and to allow electronic motor vehicle records as evidence of ownership.** **Vice Chairman Keyser** stated the legislation modernized Idaho's vehicle titling system by expanding the use of secure electronic records and allowing the Idaho Transportation Department (ITD) to accept electronic or digital titles from other states. It shortened lien release timelines for Idaho dealer transactions to 10 business days after verified funds, down from 30, resolving conflicts between title holders, credit unions, and dealers. The bill maintained security and oversight requirements for electronic providers and was supported by the Idaho Auto Dealers Association, banks, and credit unions.

**MOTION:** **Senator Hart** moved to send **H 742** to the floor with a **do pass** recommendation. **Senator Semmelroth** seconded the motion. The motion carried by **voice vote**.

H 664

**MOTOR VEHICLES - Amends existing law to provide that speed limits for vehicles with five or more axles operating at a gross weight of more than 26,000 pounds shall be the same as for other vehicles. Representative Douglas Pickett presented H 664.** He explained that road accidents were often caused more by speed differentials than by raw speed. He noted that inconsistent speeds between vehicles—such as one traveling 55 mph while another traveled 80 mph—created greater danger than the absolute speed itself. **Rep. Pickett** described how uniform speeds, guided by the 85th percentile rule (the speed at or below which 85 percent of motorists drove), reduced congestion, abrupt lane changes, tailgating, road rage, and crash severity. He cited studies, including one from the University of Arkansas, showing that a 10 mph speed differential could increase unsafe interactions by up to 227 percent. He concluded that reducing speed variability would lower the frequency and severity of accidents.

**DISCUSSION:**

**Senator Burtenshaw** asked if there was any information on the trucking industry's previous opposition to the bill, noting they were concerned it would raise liability rates on trucks. **Rep. Pickett** explained that the bill did not require all vehicles to travel at the speed limit and recognized that speed differentials would still exist, such as for trucks limited by hills or fleet policies. He stated that the bill removed mandated speed differentials, allowing vehicles that could safely travel at the speed limit to do so.

**TESTIMONY:**

**Braden Jensen**, Idaho Farm Bureau Federation (IFBF), testified in support of **H 664**. He stated that the IFBF opposed policies requiring commercial vehicles to travel below posted speed limits and agreed that reducing speed differentials would decrease lane changes, passing, vehicle interactions, and traffic congestion. He concluded that the bill aligned with IFBF policy.

**MOTION:**

**Senator Kohl** moved to send **H 664** to the floor with a **do pass** recommendation. **Senator Burtenshaw** seconded the motion. The motion carried by **voice vote**. **Senators Rabe** and **Semmelroth** requested to be recorded as voting nay.

H 716

**TRANSPORTATION - Amends existing law to revise provisions regarding apportionment of the Highway Distribution Account, to remove a limitation regarding revenues received from fuel taxes, and to revise a provision regarding the distribution of the tax on special fuels. Colby Cameron**, Governmental Affairs Manager, Idaho Transportation Department (ITD), explained that the legislation contained two substantive components. First, it updated statutory language related to the distribution of gas tax revenue. The last gas tax increase in Idaho occurred in 2015. At that time, existing revenues and the new revenues from the increase were tracked separately because some distributions applied only to the older revenue stream. One of those distributions supported the ISP through the Highway Distribution Account. In 2019, legislation was passed to gradually move ISP funding from the Highway Distribution Account to the General Fund over a five-year period, beginning in fiscal year 2021 and concluding in fiscal year 2025.

**Mr. Cameron** noted that the measure did not affect other existing distributions from the Highway Distribution Account, including allocations to local governments through the traditional 60/40 split, as well as smaller distributions such as those supporting parks and other programs. Second, the legislation addressed funding for Idaho's local bridge inspection program. The program was established in the 1980s to meet federal requirements for inspecting local bridges, with the ITD responsible for conducting those inspections and certifying bridge conditions. The State used a portion of Highway Distribution Account funds to access federal funding for the program. The State contribution had been set at \$175,000 per year, but that amount no longer covered program costs. The bill therefore proposed increasing the funding level to \$300,000 annually.

**MOTION:** **Vice Chairman Keyser** motioned to send **H 716** to the floor with a **do pass** recommendation. **Senator Kohl** seconded the motion. The motion carried by **voice vote**.

**H 825** **MOTOR VEHICLE REGISTRATION - Amends and adds to existing law to eliminate the fee for the copyrighted license plate design and to establish the America250 license plate for the benefit of the Idaho Heritage Trust.** **Representative Jeff Ehlers** explained that **H 825** addressed funding related to the Idaho Heritage Trust, a nonprofit created in 1990 during Idaho's centennial celebration to support historic preservation. The organization held the copyright to Idaho's standard red, white, and blue license plate design and currently received a mandatory \$0.50 fee from every license plate issued. The bill removed that required fee and instead created a voluntary specialty plate for the organization, similar to other specialty plates. The new plate would direct \$25 from each purchase and \$15 from renewals to the Idaho Heritage Trust. By eliminating the mandatory fee, about \$400,000 annually would remain in the plate manufacturing fund and could ultimately flow to the Highway Distribution Fund. **Rep. Ehlers** noted that the Idaho Heritage Trust had an \$18 million endowment and generated roughly \$1 million annually for preservation through interest and matching funds, allowing it to continue its mission while giving drivers the option—rather than the requirement—to support the organization. He added that a proposed amendment was included in the Committee packet and requested that **H 825** be sent to the 14th Order of Business for possible amendment.

**MOTION:** **Senator Semmelroth** moved to send **H 825** to the 14th Order of Business for possible amendment. **Senator Rabe** seconded the motion. The motion carried by **voice vote**.

**MOTION:** **Senator Semmelroth** moved to Reconsider **H 629**. **Senator Hart** seconded the motion. The motion carried by **voice vote**.

**H 629** **TRANSPORTATION - Amends existing law to provide for an electronic format of registration for vehicles - Reconsideration.** **Representative Joe Palmer** explained the main concern raised in Committee came from law enforcement, who wanted drivers to always have a paper copy of their vehicle registration in the vehicle. Earlier legislation had allowed drivers to keep registration in multiple forms: the copy mailed by the ITD, a digital version on their phone, or a printed copy. Under the proposed amendments, electronic registration would still be allowed, but drivers choosing that option would also be required to print and keep a paper copy in the vehicle. This ensured a physical registration would always be available. He noted that the original goal of the legislation was to save money by reducing mailing costs for ITD. The estimated savings were about \$800,000 if roughly half of vehicle owners opted for electronic registration, reducing postage expenses while still addressing law enforcement's concern about having a paper copy available in the vehicle.

**DISCUSSION:** **Chairman Okuniewicz** clarified that if a person completed the registration transaction online and chose the electronic option, whether they would be required to print a copy and keep it in their vehicle, rather than relying solely on a digital version on their phone. **Rep. Palmer** responded there would be two options available: individuals could select the traditional option and receive a registration copy mailed by the ITD, or they could choose the electronic option, which would allow them to download and print the registration document themselves.

**Senator Rabe** asked what would happen if someone properly registered their vehicle but failed to print the required paper copy of the registration. She questioned whether that situation would create an additional penalty. **Rep. Palmer** responded that if individuals chose not to follow the law, there was little that could be done to prevent it. He explained that the law already required drivers to keep

a paper copy of their vehicle registration in the car, so the legislation would not change that requirement. If someone failed to have the paper copy, officers could see that the vehicle was properly registered when running the plate. In most cases, officers could issue a fix-it ticket and give the driver time to show proof of registration. However, officers could also issue a citation if they chose to enforce the requirement. Overall, the process and enforcement would remain the same as under current law.

**Senator Semmelroth** explained that after Rep. Palmer's previous presentation, the Committee had discussed **H 629** and the concerns of using a barcode on a driver's phone. The code could be scanned by law enforcement to access the vehicle registration, potentially eliminating the need for a paper copy and avoiding situations where an officer would need to take the driver's phone back to the patrol car. **Rep. Palmer** clarified that ITD already included a QR code on vehicle registration notices sent to drivers. The code allowed individuals to use their phone to access the system to renew or download their registration. Under the proposal, drivers choosing the electronic option would have the registration available on their phone, which could be scanned by law enforcement if needed. He stated they would still be required to print a paper copy and keep it in their vehicle.

**MOTION:** **Vice Chairman Keyser** moved to send **H 629** to the 14th Order of Business for possible amendment. **Senar Galloway** seconded the motion. The motion carried by **voice vote**.

**DISCUSSION:** **Vice Chairman Keyser** noted that the proposal allowed ITD to issue vehicle registrations electronically, which could be accessed on a driver's phone. He emphasized that all drivers would still be required to maintain a physical copy of the registration in their vehicle. He stated that the change primarily allowed ITD to save funds and modernize their electronic system.

**Senator Kohl** expressed appreciation to **Rep. Palmer** for making the amendments, noting that they improved the legislation. He stated as long as it was made clear that a physical copy of the registration was still required, those individuals without a printer could still be provided with a printed copy from ITD.

**ADJOURNED:** There being no further business at this time, **Chairman Okuniewicz** adjourned the meeting at 2:31 p.m.

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Senator Okuniewicz  
Chair

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Melissa Price  
Secretary