



## **2021 STATE OF THE STATE AND BUDGET ADDRESS**

*Governor Brad Little*  
*January 11, 2021*

My fellow Idahoans, in the 245-year history of this great country of ours, Americans have been through triumphs and trials.

The dark events at the U.S. Capitol last week disturbed us. The violent acts of some overshadowed the peaceful acts of many. Former President George W. Bush aptly described the events as fitting of a “banana republic, not our democratic republic.” The riots tarnished the shining values America stands for.

This is not who we are.

Hostility and violence are not an expression of your rights; they are a violation of everyone else’s.

While we should be celebrating the openness of our government, a fence is being erected around the U.S. Capitol. I mourn the loss of life and the loss of access and what it means for future generations of Americans.

But I believe we the people have the power to form a more perfect union.

How?

By condemning the upheaval, not defending or denying it.

By refusing to be intimidated by those who seek to destroy our country.

By redoubling our commitment to peaceful assembly and civil discourse – not just in the halls of the Capitol but in all areas of our lives.

In Idaho, we’ll celebrate the centennial of our statehouse this year, a building known as “the Capitol of Light.” What an appropriate time to let the light of democracy shine – today and for one hundred more years and beyond.

The openness of our political process in Idaho is demonstrated in the openness of this building. Let’s keep it that way.

In preparing this speech, I looked back on my State of the State address last year.

I began by saying, “What a year!” We had just wrapped up a year of historic regulatory reforms, investments in education, and other shared achievements.

I think it's appropriate to repeat that remark again this year.

One year ago, a global pandemic was not on our radar. We've come a long way in our fight against the enemy virus, and with the arrival of a safe vaccine just a few weeks ago, the end of the battle is in sight. We're in the home stretch, and together we will finish strong.

I want to thank my wife and our First Lady, Teresa, for her unrelenting support for Idahoans during a very challenging year. Teresa, you are a source of peace and strength for me and for the people of Idaho. I am proud of you and our entire family.

I also want to thank the Idaho Legislature for your work during the special session. Unlike many states, Idaho proactively addressed the safety and security of the general election and protected businesses, schools, and churches responsibly operating during the pandemic.

Sadly, we have lost over 1,500 of our fellow Idahoans to a new, dangerous, and deadly disease. Thousands of Idahoans of all ages and health conditions have been hospitalized. Many friends and neighbors lost time at work and face long-term health problems. To the mothers and fathers, children, siblings, grandparents, and veterans impacted, our hearts are with you. Please join me in a moment of silence to remember our fellow Idahoans who lost their lives to COVID-19.

Throughout the pandemic, the women and men in scrubs have been nothing short of heroic. Idaho's nurses, doctors, and health care workers put their own safety on the line, pulling extra shifts to care for the influx of COVID-19 patients in our hospitals.

Idaho's hospitals continue to do an excellent job of sharing resources and shifting operations to prevent a crisis. They have also shared the reality of COVID-19. They are telling the stories of COVID-19 patients – the stories of people whose organs are shutting down from an aggressive disease; the stories of young, healthy people who ended up on life support; the stories of veterans who fought enemies overseas only to suffer from a new invisible enemy here in their community. They are telling the stories of exhausted doctors and nurses caring for patients who cannot be with their families.

The COVID-19 reality is heart breaking.

To Idaho's hospitals and health care workers, thank you.

The pandemic turned our work lives, social lives, and home lives upside down. It pushed our healthcare, education, and unemployment systems to new lengths. It divided Americans in our individual views on the severity of the disease and how we should respond to it.

But the pandemic also reminds us that in troubled times, we have choices.

We can choose compassion over conflict.

Listening over lecturing.

Humanity over hostility.

These choices start with each one of us, individually, in our hearts. It is a concept that aligns perfectly with the fiercely independent and self-reliant spirit of the people of Idaho.

I choose to remember the historic year by the innumerable acts of kindness displayed by many Idahoans over the acts of aggression by a few.

From the beginning, my goal as Governor has been to make Idaho the place where we all can have the opportunity to thrive, where our children and grandchildren choose to stay, and for the ones who have left to choose to return.

That pursuit steered our pandemic response. Not one state or country in the world opted for the “no action” alternative. That approach would have ended in catastrophic loss of life and destructive consequences for our healthcare system and economy.

My North Star during this trying time has been to protect life and critical health care capacity while supporting faith, families, businesses, and students.

No other state prioritized support for businesses and the workforce as much as Idaho.

We assembled a team of business leaders from companies big and small to guide decisions on our economic rebound plan. We put more than \$300 million toward grants and equipment for small businesses. We helped get workers back on the job. We lowered unemployment insurance taxes for nearly all Idaho businesses. We ensured public safety personnel had all the resources needed to protect our loved ones, while giving \$126 million back to property taxpayers. And Idaho will benefit for years to come from the \$50 million investment in broadband infrastructure to support remote working and learning and more economic opportunity in rural Idaho.

We all play a role in choosing to protect lives, our economy, and our kids’ ability to continue learning in their classrooms. It is a responsibility shared by all of us.

But our state does play a role in times of an emergency.

We increased and expedited COVID-19 testing and took other steps to reduce exposure to a new disease. We raised capacity at the state lab to more quickly turn around results from an increased number of tests administered in schools and long-term care facilities. We enabled pharmacists to administer testing and vaccinations.

Our staged economic rebound plan had one goal – to protect lives and prevent a crisis in our hospitals while the economy could move forward. Businesses and places of worship in Idaho have been open longer than almost every other state during the pandemic. The statewide public health orders, guidelines, and recommended protocols we made available are for each one of us to choose to follow so Idaho can stay open.

In order to protect lives, we needed to elevate healthcare capacity so we could all continue to access care. To minimize the time COVID-19 patients spend in the hospital, we allocated new and effective treatments. To better protect residents of long-term care facilities, we designated COVID-only facilities and put millions toward testing of facility workers.

In the spring, Idahoans collectively slowed the spread of the disease while we worked to prepare our healthcare system. It worked. Hospitals, clinics, and first responders received more resources and staff to handle an influx of patients.

We cut red tape to expand access to more medical professionals. It worked. We licensed 1,100 more nursing professionals since last spring.

And we lifted regulations to expand telehealth access. It worked. The use of telehealth rose by 4,000-

percent, and Idahoans in all parts of the state could continue to access care from the safety of their homes. The pandemic opened the door to great advances in telehealth access. Let's work together to make those red tape cuts permanent!

I also activated the Idaho National Guard to increase health care capacity. The guardsmen are deployed across the state to help with testing, decontamination, and planning, and they're assisting with critical vaccine distribution. Our men and women in the Guard are always prepared to serve, especially in a time of emergency. We are deeply grateful for their service.

Members of the seven public health boards made courageous decisions in the face of heated opposition. They have my support. Mayors, county and city officials, and school board members also made very tough decisions. These local leaders labored late into the evening. They navigated new technologies to inform the public. They wrestled with decisions they knew would draw criticism. Thank you.

Unlike many other states, almost all Idaho school districts are delivering full or partial in-person instruction. For months, teachers and others have accommodated changes in the delivery of education under uncertain time frames. I join many in expressing my deep appreciation to those who are serving our students during these extraordinary circumstances.

To support our school officials, Idaho created a framework to guide local decision-making on safe school operations while emphasizing the importance for students to learn in the classroom with their teachers and classmates. We also made historic investments in education – bumping up funding by \$300 million or 16-percent overall – to support students, teachers, families, and safety.

Parents continue to do much of the heavy lifting for their children's education during this once-in-a-lifetime pandemic. I know it isn't easy. I know at times it has felt impossible to balance work demands while facilitating online learning for your children at home. Many of you lost paychecks or left your jobs to be there for your children during this unprecedented time. Our \$50 million "Strong Families, Strong Students" initiative supported many of these families by helping them access the technology and educational services required for successful at-home learning.

Like a tornado, 2020 was damaging and deadly.

But with the arrival of a safe vaccine just a few weeks ago, the dark clouds of the pandemic are starting to part.

There is an uplifting sense that we may be in the final lap of this race against COVID-19. The finish line is close, but the worst part of the pandemic may not be behind us. We cannot relent in our personal actions to protect everything and everyone we hold dear, especially in the critical weeks and months ahead.

Adaptation, determination, and resilience define Idahoans.

As we reflect on a momentous year, we are more than ready to look ahead.

The state of the state is strong.

To keep our children and grandchildren in Idaho, we must continue to lead the nation in economic prosperity.

I am not surprised that Idaho ranks first among states for economic momentum. Idaho ranks first for financial solvency and personal income growth.

Together, the Legislature and I laid the groundwork before the pandemic to rebound quickly during tough times, proving once again that conservative principles of governing bring opportunity for citizens during the highs and the lows.

A robust economy cannot exist with burdensome regulations on citizens and business. Part of the reason Idaho's economy is catapulting ahead of other states is because of the regulatory rollbacks we achieved together before and during the pandemic.

Together, the Legislature and our administration achieved historic regulatory cuts in my first year as Governor, making Idaho the least regulated state in the nation. For two straight years we've cut red tape. The people of Idaho can be assured that, together, their Governor and legislators will maintain a lean and efficient system of regulations in Idaho moving forward.

Simply put, fiscal conservatism and the collaboration between executive and legislative branches have positioned Idaho to emerge from the pandemic stronger than ever.

Together, before COVID-19, the Legislature and I were already preparing for an inevitable slowdown of Idaho's economy. We limited government spending, used conservative revenue forecasting, and maintained healthy rainy-day balances.

We took a lot of heat from some who could not wrap their heads around this basic conservative principle: the time to prepare for the bad times is in the good times.

Turns out we were right.

While other states face potential budget cuts of 20- to 40-percent and more, Idaho is in the enviable position of having a record budget surplus.

The sound decisions of Idaho leaders in the past have gotten us to where we are today.

Let's keep our state on this strong economic trajectory, together. Now is the time to make meaningful investments.

I am happy to announce my new plan to put more money back in the pockets of hardworking Idahoans and make strategic investments to propel our state even further ahead in prosperity.

My plan is called "Building Idaho's Future."

I am proposing more than \$450 million in tax relief. This would be among the single largest tax cuts in Idaho history!

To get there, I'm proposing \$295 million in one-time tax relief and \$160 million in permanent tax cuts to boost Idahoans' prosperity while keeping our tax rates competitive and our business climate vibrant.

Curbing government spending and returning taxpayer dollars should be the perpetual mission of public servants. I look forward to working with my partners in the Legislature to get tax relief across the finish line for our citizens.

My plan also shores up millions more in cash payments for small business, on top of the \$300 million we directed to small businesses last year. Small business is the backbone of our entire way of life.

We're able to achieve tax relief and continued support for small business in part because, together, we cut government spending early on.

My plan reinvests these savings into infrastructure projects with long-lasting value. With these investments, we will help preserve one of our citizens' most precious commodities: their time.

We won't be able to keep our children and grandchildren in Idaho if we cannot alleviate traffic congestion, especially as our state continues to attract newcomers fleeing dysfunctional states. No one wants to be stuck in traffic when they can spend time with their family.

My plan invests \$126 million in state and local highway infrastructure projects and makes targeted investments in safe routes to schools, rail infrastructure, and community airports.

I am also proposing \$80 million dollars in new ongoing transportation funding. A dependable transportation system is fundamental to commerce. In Idaho, we grow and process most of our commodities, and getting those products down the road in a timely fashion is critical. In all parts of the state, major transportation projects continue to get pushed out further and further.

One of the basic roles of government is to ensure a safe, connected system of roads and highways.

We cannot ignore a growing problem that steals Idahoans' time and threatens their safety and our economic prosperity.

We cannot delay any longer in executing a sustainable plan for transportation funding into the future.

We cannot postpone securing a long-term funding source.

We must address the transportation needs for this generation and the next.

We must act now.

The Legislature and I will work together on a sustainable transportation funding plan – one that blends both General Fund and reliable user fees to keep our economy driving forward!

Safe communities form a thriving Idaho. My plan also invests in the men and women of law enforcement.

It's never been a more difficult time to put on the uniform. These brave souls demonstrate great restraint in order to deescalate intense situations. Their path to law enforcement stems from a true desire to serve and protect us. They are committed to implementing the best training and building strong relationships with the communities they serve.

My plan invests in the items necessary to support frontline personnel at the Idaho State Police -- and training for our local frontline police officers.

While other places seek to defund the police, I am proud to say that Idaho DEFENDS the police. Idaho "backs the blue."

Another way we make Idaho safe is through a low crime rate. Our safety is maintained when those returning home from a period of incarceration can become productive citizens. Thanks to investments we made in our correctional system last year, Idaho is safer because fewer Idaho inmates are violating parole. My plan keeps

us on a path to save taxpayer resources by making strategic investments in overdue infrastructure needs in our criminal justice system so we can break the expensive revolving door of repeat offenders.

My “Building Idaho’s Future” plan also invests in needed projects for agriculture and water infrastructure to aid in the economic vitality of rural Idaho.

In Idaho, agriculture remains a way of life. Last year, Idaho’s farmers, ranchers and allied businesses met a crisis with increased productivity, as they have done for generations. Farmers gave Idahoans faith that empty grocery store shelves were just a matter of timing and not an issue of true scarcity. Idaho agriculture continued to feed the state, the nation, and the world.

Agriculture – and our economic future – hinge on safe and dependable water sources. Water is truly the source of life. My plan makes \$60 million in strategic investments in long-term water projects and safe water systems for our communities.

Let me return to my top priority – Idaho’s children.

We need to continue to invest in an education system that gives the next generation of Idahoans a solid foundation for lifelong learning and meaningful employment, here at home in Idaho.

The pandemic highlighted schools as the heart of our communities and the bedrock of a strong economy.

But with all the disruptions in education delivery over the past ten months, many of Idaho’s students are experiencing a learning loss. For some students who were already on track, the learning loss could range a few months. But our needier students may have lost more than a year’s worth of learning.

We must close the achievement gap.

To help, my “Building Idaho’s Future” plan recommends investments in literacy – my highest priority in education.

We must ensure this school year is an anomaly – not a permanent system-wide flaw for Idaho’s students in the next decade or more. We must make sure all young students are on track to read by the end of the third grade.

Our students are also Idaho’s future workforce. My plan supports Idaho’s higher education system as well as career technical education programs across Idaho that connect students with employers who need them and equip students with the skills they need while they earn a degree. Our kids need to know all career paths available to them.

For our kids to have a future in Idaho, they also need equal access to education. We must continue to make investments in internet connectivity.

Last year, a family in Kootenai County was struggling with distance learning. The family didn’t have access to broadband so the two children had to use their mom’s cell phone and data plan to complete their schoolwork. In Arimo, students struggled during the pandemic with equal access because they didn’t have the internet speeds necessary for video conferencing. Now, thanks to our investments, these students have better learning opportunities. There are many more stories like these.

Simply put, broadband access is central to commerce, economic growth, and education. We’ve made major progress – from Aberdeen to Winchester – and my plan continues that momentum.

Beyond my “Building Idaho’s Future” plan, I’m proposing a “no frills” budget for Fiscal Year 2022. My budget leaves a prudent surplus, bolsters rainy-day funds, and reflects my continued priority on education, including our valuable teachers.

My budget meets our historic commitment to teachers by fully implementing our \$250 million investment in the career ladder.

To help in the ongoing pandemic response, my budget also bolsters Idaho’s public health infrastructure. I’m recommending funds to increase nursing capacity and also to address the shortage of physicians across Idaho. I also propose putting more than 250-million dollars toward our homestretch efforts to finish the fight against COVID-19.

Idahoans spent more time outdoors in the past year than perhaps ever before. The outdoors offers Idaho families a sense of release and fun. To further improve our quality of life and make Idaho the place where future generations can recreate outdoors, I’m also recommending we ramp up investments to promote healthy lands and reduce wildfire risk.

Activists are trying to rebrand wildfires as “climate fires” – a divisive, defeatist term that does not accurately capture the West’s fire problem and dismisses the opportunity to do something about it.

Through collaborative initiatives such as the Good Neighbor Authority and Shared Stewardship, Idaho is focused on a solution – active land management.

Long gone are the days of no-action tactics that don’t work to protect the land or livelihoods.

Idaho is actively mapping out the future of our forests, and your grandkids and mine will directly benefit from our actions today.

In Idaho, we believe government must be responsive to the people it serves. To ease citizen participation in their state government, I’m recommending the creation of a new one stop shop for Idahoans to access public meeting information for any state entity. State Controller Brandon Woolf – my partner in government transparency – will administer the new online resource for civic engagement. We will continue to stand up for good government.

The ongoing growth in the state budget – just 3.8-percent – is among the most conservative in years. Our commitment to conservative budgeting – and quick action during the pandemic – are the reasons Idaho is excelling while other states’ economies and state budgets are pummeled. Let’s continue to live within our means and make investments where they count.

I’ll repeat it: what a year we had.

My fellow Idahoans, the pandemic made us appreciate parts of life we took for granted, and I don’t just mean the availability of toilet paper.

We learned not to take for granted time with family, our faith, and our freedom.

Despite all the differences of opinion, I know this: we are united in our love for Idaho and this great country of ours.

I am reminded of the timeless words of one of my heroes, President Ronald Reagan. He said, “The crisis



we're facing today... does require... our best effort and our willingness to believe in ourselves and to believe in our capacity to perform great deeds, to believe that together, with God's help, we can and will resolve the problems which now confront us. And after all, why shouldn't we believe that?"

I believe history will remember Idahoans' tremendous outpouring of support for each other during the pandemic.

I want to thank the people of Idaho for their perseverance and the care they have shown others over the past ten months.

In times of hardship, opportunity for growth emerges.

As Idahoans, we must choose to come out of the pandemic stronger, more resilient, and more united than ever before.

God bless Idaho, and God bless the United States of America.