

The Common Interest offers alternative to politics as usual

commentary



dan popkey

As your homeowners' exemption climbs and shields you from property tax increases in years to come, credit a fledgling group of independents who have swiftly become players at the Legislature.

The Common Interest, founded by Keith Allred of Eagle, a Harvard professor and fifth-generation Idahoan, helped persuade the Legislature to tie the exemption's value not to the Consumer Price Index, but to the Idaho House Price Index. That will more accurately reflect Idaho's hot market and slow the growth of property taxes.

"Keith brought it to our attention," said Sen. Brent Hill, R-Rexburg, a member of the Senate tax panel. "I don't think we even knew there was a housing index."

In the last 15 years, the housing-price index has risen an average of 5.6 percent annually, twice as fast as the CPI. At that

rate, the \$75,000 homeowners' exemption will reach \$169,500 in 15 years. Business groups vigorously opposed the pro-homeowner Senate amendment because they'll make up the difference in taxes.

Founded just 18 months ago, The Common Interest also influenced the passage of four bills limiting government's use of eminent domain and helped press lawmakers to open committee meetings except in extraordinary circumstances.

The group has 850 members who take civic responsibility seriously, but don't feel at home

in either major political party. Instead of membership dues, they commit to spending at least an hour a year studying an issue and promise to vote in primary and general elections.

"Rights in a free country have got to be tied to paying attention and getting involved," said Anne Hutchinson, a former HP employee from Meridian who attended a briefing last week at Allred's home.

The Common Interest is unique, weighing in only when two-thirds of its membership agrees on an issue, and only after they've studied briefing papers written by Allred.

"They don't seem to have an ax to grind," Hill said. "They're not radical to the left or right. They have diverse interests."

House Assistant Majority Leader Mike Moyle, R-Star, said Allred was a big help on eminent domain and had clout on property taxes. "He was a good ally when he was with you; and when he was against you, you

had to listen to him because he made sense."

Senate Local Government and Taxation Committee Chairman Hal Bunderson, R-Meridian, said Allred's credibility rose every time he testified. "He's intellectually honest, professional and independent-minded."

Bunderson said he hopes The Common Interest's influence continues to grow. "Anytime you get a group of people who are independent, rational and look at long-term consequences, it's helpful. Futuristic thinking is very useful in a legislative setting."

The members I met last week were a refreshing bunch buoyed by the early success of their experiment. "We can accomplish anything we want if we'd all get involved," said Ron Boaz of Kuna, a mechanical designer retired from the defense industry.

Allred, 41, grew up in Twin



Keith Allred

Falls, the great-great grandson of Silas Allred, a Mormon pioneer who ran cattle and sheep in Blaine and Custer counties. He went to Stanford and UCLA, taught at Columbia before Harvard, and returned

home two years ago for a stint at Boise State and to satisfy his love of cutting horses.

An expert on conflict resolution, he's mediating the sometimes bitter dispute between local governments and the Nez Perce Tribe over their respective powers. He's also a board member of an arm of Enlibra, an organization founded by former Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt, a Republican, and former Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber, a Democrat, to foster collaborative decision-making on environmental issues.

Allred rejects the red-state, blue-state notion that Americans are sharply partisan, citing research that says small minorities are very liberal or very

conservative.

"It turns out that a majority of us would not consider ourselves warriors in the culture war," he said. "We consider ourselves independent. We might lean Republican or Democrat, but we pick and choose and like good ideas wherever they come from."

Allred said he has considered running for office, but believes he has more influence nurturing The Common Interest.

I think he's on to something. If you're an independent voter looking for an alternative, check out TheCommonInterest.org. I think you'll be impressed.

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Link to The Common Interest. The group will post its legislative scorecard by May 14, displaying incumbents' votes and challengers' positions in contests statewide.