

# Thrifty in daylight, spendthrifts at night

Posted: Wednesday, October 5, 2011 12:00 am | *Updated: 7:27 pm, Tue Oct 4, 2011.*

Thrifty in daylight, spendthrifts at night Marty Trillhaase The Lewiston Tribune |

When you're paying attention, Idaho state Sens. John McGee, R-Caldwell, and Curt McKenzie, R-Nampa, are the souls of thrift.

If conservative government demands slashing the meager Medicaid benefits Idaho allocates to its most vulnerable citizens, McGee and McKenzie are there.

If the state simply can't avoid another round of cuts at Idaho's institutions of higher learning, McGee and McKenzie are dependable votes for economizing.

And if there is no other way to balance the budget than to chop away at public school budgets, you can count on McGee and McKenzie to go along.

It's all in a day's work for these Canyon County Republicans who insist on holding the line on extravagant government spending to avoid hiking taxes on ordinary Idahoans.

Of course, that didn't mean the money wasn't needed.

Three years into the Great Recession, Idaho has long since sliced off the fat in its budget. It's now breaking bones, and sucking out the marrow.. Adults who depended on Medicaid for treatment will go without. Some young people won't pursue a college education because the escalating state tuition required to backfill spending cuts scared them off. And in the public schools, parents now must choose between voluntarily paying stiffer property taxes or watching their children fall behind.

When your backs are turned, it's a different story.

Then, McGee and McKenzie have no such scruples about lavishing limited state resources - on themselves.

The pair are among 21 state lawmakers who live within 50 miles of the state capital. Like thousands of their fellow Treasure Valley citizens, they have the option of commuting to work. If they do, the state will reimburse them \$49 a day for their expenses. Mileage reimbursement also is available.

On the other hand, should they eschew the daily grind of a 26-mile drive for McGee or a 20-mile trip for McKenzie, the state will pay them \$122 a day to set up living quarters in Boise.

Chalk that up as another of the special breaks Idaho lawmakers get. No other group of Boise's commuters - private or public - gets a subsidy. Let's not even discuss the generous health insurance and pension benefits these part-time lawmakers bestow upon themselves.

It's unclear how many of the 21 Republicans who have the option made the choice to pay rent in Boise. But at least McGee and McKenzie did.

Except they didn't.

The Associated Press reports McGee sleeps at his parents' Boise home during the legislative session.

McKinzie sprawls out on a couch in his Boise law office.

They still pocket the \$122 every day the Legislature is in session.

McGee - who between his still-unexplained Charlie Sheen-esque drunken driving bout and a recent junket to Turkey is on track to rival former GOP congressional hopeful Vaughn Ward's penchant for self-inflicted wounds - told the AP to take it up with Senate President Brent Hill, R-Rexburg. "These matters are handled by (Hill's) office. I suggest to talk to him."

McKinzie said he took the money because he needed a bigger office for his couch.

"We could have gotten a much cheaper rent somewhere else," he said.

McKenzie also apparently collected mileage, even though he was spending his nights not on the road but on the couch. A Senate secretary said the extra payments were a "clerical error."

McKenzie will return at least \$2,402 to the state.

It's not a lot of money, but clearly McGee and McKenzie didn't need it. Other Idahoans desperately did. McGee and McKenzie knew that - but spent it anyway.

When he justified unraveling the social safety net, Gov. C. L. (Butch) Otter berated the "soul-crushing tyranny of entitlement." He could not have been more wrong. Idaho suffers from the soulless tyranny of the entitled. - M.T.