

Idaho lawmakers taking a junket? Shocking

Marty Trillhaase The Lewiston Tribune

Shocked to find a group of Idaho legislators taking a taxpayer-funded limousine ride - replete with mini-bar, mood lighting and television - along the streets of Manhattan at five times the cost of a taxi?

Stunned to discover that some of these lawmakers take their spouses along on a junket to New York City?

Amazed that Treasurer Ron Crane has been squiring these politicians to the Big Apple in splendor for some time?

Dumbstruck that it takes nearly a dozen legislators to tell Wall Street its business?

Incredulous that until The Associated Press exposed the practice, nobody seemed to notice?

Then you've not been paying attention. Make certain you're registered to vote. The state's political machinery is counting on your support.

As the AP's John Miller reports, Crane's office spent nearly \$10,000 the past three years hiring stretch limousines, Lincoln Town Cars and executive sedans to shuttle legislators, state employees and their families through New York. Say insiders, much the same thing has been going on throughout Crane's four terms. In fact, several lawmakers have made the trip more than once.

But here's the larger question: Why are so many Idaho lawmakers in New York in the first place?

At issue is Crane's yearly pilgrimage to Wall Street, where he safeguards Idaho's pristine bond rating and secures more than \$500 million in short-term debt to cover the state's tax anticipation notes. There's nothing more important in Crane's portfolio. If he messes this up, it drives up borrowing costs not just for the state, but for every city, county, school district and local government that floats a bond.

So you want Crane back there talking to Moody's and Standard and Poors.

You also need a member of the governor's budget team who can tie up any loose ends about how many dollars the state expects to take in, what the economic forecast looks like and how much money the state is on track to spend.

Perhaps a senior legislator can provide a few more details. But the fact is the experts at Moody's or S&P are adept at reading economists' reports, budgets, appropriations, revenue forecasts and spending histories.

They've got a clipping service, so they know the political scene as well. What they don't need are six, 10 or a dozen legislators telling them what they already know.

But going to New York is such a great gig that when Crane offers lawmakers a seat, few apparently decline. Even if lawmakers have to cover their spouse's airfare, the trip is still a bargain.

Of course, these are the same Idaho lawmakers who avoid lowering their own pay while cutting everything else in state government.

They continue to claim every dime of per diem pay they can. Two Canyon County senators - John McGee of Caldwell and Curt McKenzie of Nampa - went so far as to sleep at a parents' house or on an office couch to scoop extra money.

They're not shy about accepting state health care insurance and a state pension that allows part-time lawmakers to accrue years of service as if they were full-time state workers.

And while public employees took pay freezes or even unpaid furloughs, lawmakers made sure to pass out nearly \$100,000 in bonuses to their own staff.

So accepting a free trip to Manhattan is just one more sign that in the primordial ooze of Idaho's one-party rule, it's getting harder to separate the blue-chip political cronies from the everyday hypocrites. - M.T.