

Mailing it in

Marty Trilhaase The Lewiston Tribune

JEERS ... to Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter. As columnist Chris Carlson so aptly put it this week, Otter has been "mailing it in." The evidence is starting to pile up. For instance, Idaho's elected leadership gathered in Boise Thursday for the Associated Taxpayers of Idaho annual conference. Traditionally the opening round of the legislative season - lawmakers formally convene Jan. 9 - the ATI forum telegraphs what's ahead. With the state's top echelon attending, governors use that platform to at least foreshadow what they may have in mind.

After his office last week merely announced there would be "no public events or meetings scheduled," Otter left Tuesday for Orlando, Fla., where he is attending a meeting of the Republican Governors Association.

Reports the Idaho Statesman's Dan Popkey: The RGA is paying for the trip. Good thing, too, considering Idaho's too broke to pay Otter's dues to the National Governors Association.

So filling in for Otter at ATI was Lt. Gov. Brad Little - which he did at last year's ATI conference as well.

Little also assumed Otter's responsibilities two weeks ago when the state was preparing to execute condemned murderer Paul Ezra Rhoades. Drawing Otter away was the opportunity to travel to Maui's plush Fairmont Kea Lani Resort and a chance to mingle with those attending the California Independent Voter Project's "Business and Leader Exchange." With Otter out of state, Little was technically governor and, at least formally, held the power to issue a 30-day reprieve if he chose.

Earlier this year Otter became the first Idaho chief executive in four decades to blow off the Idaho Press Club's legislative luncheon. Little went instead.

Why did Otter fight so hard for a second term if all he wanted was a four-year-long grand tour of America's favorite destinations? Why not quit now? At least Idaho would have one full-time governor instead of two guys taking turns.

CHEERS ... to Idaho Attorney General Lawrence Wasden. Idaho has no greater advocate for transparency in government.

Since 2004, Wasden has partnered with Idahoans for Openness in Government, co-hosting seminars delving into the details of Idaho's public records and public meeting laws. The idea is to inform both government officials and members of the public about their rights and obligations.

The sessions are free and open to the public.

Next week, he's headed north:

- Wednesday - Moscow City Hall from 6 to 8:30 p.m. The Moscow-Pullman Daily News is co-sponsoring.
- Thursday - Lewiston at Lewis-Clark State College, Sacajawea Hall room 115, from 6 to 8:30 p.m. The Lewiston Tribune is co-sponsoring.

JEERS ... to Washington state's Democratic, Republican and Libertarian parties. The people are against them. So are the courts. Yet the party professionals were back in the 9th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals Tuesday, asking the federal courts to toss out popular Top Two primary.

To recap: For 70 years, Washington voters went about their business nominating people for office in a blanket primary. Voters loved it because the system allowed them to vote within races rather than parties.

For instance, they could select the Democratic nominee for governor before shifting over to pick the GOP candidate for Congress.

Parties hated it, contending crossover voting diluted the voice of their true believers. Ten years ago, they persuaded the U.S. Supreme Court to toss it out. The same precedent empowered Idaho's GOP to close its primary to non-Republicans beginning this year.

So Washington substituted an open primary - voters could choose one party or the other - without being forced to register in its place. Idaho was happy to have that much, but Washington residents rebelled and imposed the Top Two by initiative in 2004.

Top Two means the candidates with the two highest totals - regardless of party affiliation - advance to the general election in November. It passed with 60 percent. Once in practice, a Stuart Ellway poll found 76 percent of the voters liked it.

So score one for the voters. They outsmarted the politicians - because Top Two no longer guaranteed a Republican and a Democrat a slot on the general election ballot.

Score two for the voters when they also outsmarted the party lawyers, who took the case to the U.S. Supreme Court and lost on 7-2 ruling in 2008.

Score three for the voters when Republicans, Democrats and Libertarians argued Secretary of State Sam Reed hadn't implemented the Top Two primary correctly. Not so, said U.S. District Court Judge John Coughenour of Seattle.

"Judge Coughenour's wise ruling told us that the primary belongs to the voters and not solely to the parties," Reed said.

Anybody want to take bets on the fourth round? At the rate the political parties are going, they'll not only see Washington operate its fifth round of Top Two primaries next year, they'll stand by while the idea catches on across the country.

CHEERS ... to AARP of Idaho. It's been a decade since Sen. Shawn Keogh, R-Sandpoint, tried to give consumers an even break on electricity, telephone service and natural gas rates.

Her bill to establish a consumer advocate died in committee. That left Idaho among six states - and the only one in the West - without a consumer's voice to counter the arguments of utility and corporate lawyers and accountants before the Public Utilities Commission.

Last week, the Idaho Legislature's Interim Energy, Environment and Technology Committee voted 7-6 against creating an advocate's office.

Says AARP's David Irwin: Forty-one percent of Idahoans age 50 and older struggle to pay their utility bills. So Irwin's group, representing 180,000 people, intends to push the issue in the 2012 Legislature. Good for Irwin. - M.T.