

## **Tainted**

Marty Trillhaase The Lewiston Tribune

JEERS ... to House Republican Caucus Chairman Ken Roberts of Donnelly. What in the world was Roberts doing in Lewiston Tuesday night as Nez Perce County Republicans were nominating successors to former state Sen. Joe Stegner?

Roberts doesn't live in the district. He doesn't serve in the Senate.

Reports the Tribune's Bill Spence, Roberts was invited. It's been close to a century since the local GOP had to replace one of its own in the Legislature and 7th Legislative District Republican Chairwoman Corinne Zenner wanted Roberts' expertise.

He was called in to serve as a neutral observer and parliamentarian.

Roberts?

Roberts is as disinterested about what happens to Stegner's seat as the Boston Red Sox are about the New York Yankees' pitching staff.

That's like asking McDonalds to fry Wendy's burgers.

Or putting the Strategic Air Command in charge of Soviet radar installations.

If you want objective mastery of Idaho election laws, consult Secretary of State Ben Ysursa.

If, on the other hand, you want to taint the process, recruit Roberts.

This is a guy with a blatantly obvious agenda.

His doctrinaire House Republican leadership is constantly at odds with the more reasonable Senate. Stegner was a stalwart within the diminishing ranks of Senate GOP moderates. If he's replaced by a more conservative Republican, the Senate tilts more toward the House.

Such a transition may not suit Nez Perce County voters, who trend toward centrist candidates.

It may not even serve the interests of Nez Perce County Republicans, who risk losing the seat next year to a Democrat more in tune with the middle.

Typically, a Senate vacancy goes to a local House member. Rep. Jeff Nasset, R-Lewiston, wanted it and he had the bona fides - a Republican who demonstrated his political acumen by ousting Democratic Rep. Liz Chavez of Lewiston last year.

Instead, a handful of precinct captains nominated Dan Johnson, the city's solid waste manager and a Port of Lewiston commissioner; former congressional staffer Kristy Stedman; and city Councilor Thyra Stevenson.

Gov. C. L. (Butch) Otter will make the final pick.

If this move shifts the state Senate, do you really expect Roberts to be shocked?

JEERS ... to Washington Sen. Ed Murray, D-Seattle. He's not the only lawmaker dragging his feet during the 30-day special session, but as chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, what Murray says goes.

And what Murray says is this: Forget about filling the \$1.4 billion hole in Washington's budget until after Christmas. Lawmakers might get around to finding \$300 million to \$500 million in cuts by then. But not much more.

"I'm suddenly hearing this from reporters, and I don't know who put what in your ears, but it is nothing different than what we started talking about before the session," Murray said.

Delay carries a price.

Office of Financial Management Director Marty Brown says every day the state goes without a budget, it sinks \$41 million deeper in the hole.

If lawmakers don't act on Gov. Chris Gregoire's suggested temporary half-cent sales tax to buy back \$500 million of cuts by the end of the month, it will too be late to get the question on the March election ballot.

Besides, none of this was dumped on unsuspecting lawmakers.

By June, it was clear Washington's revenues were deteriorating.

By August, Brown's office sent out letters directing state agencies to show how they might implement 5 percent and 10 percent budget cuts.

The next month, Washington's budget hole deepened to \$1.3 billion.

In October, Gregoire rolled out her response - a list of \$4 billion in possible cuts, including \$2 billion in targeted cuts - and her announcement for a special session.

Lawmakers know how to do this. Last year, they went to Olympia and in a one-day session resolved the immediate budget crisis.

Why the lethargic response this time?

JEERS ... to U.S. Sens. Jim Risch and Mike Crapo, R-Idaho. Last week, they had a choice: Raise your taxes or those of the rich.

Guess who won? Not you.

On Dec. 1, Democrats tried to renew the year-old payroll tax cut and pay for it by imposing a 3.25 percent surcharge on millionaires. Crapo, Risch and the GOP minority blocked the idea.

Crapo and Risch are not opposed to a payroll tax holiday. A year ago, they voted for it - even though it meant piling on more national debt.

And just after killing the Democratic plan, Risch and Crapo joined Minority Leader Mitch McConnell's failed gambit to provide one year of payroll tax benefits through 10 years' worth of budget savings. Conservatives such as Tom Coburn, R-Okla., and Jim DeMint, R-S.C., saw the maneuver for the gimmick it was.

When the payroll tax cut is passed, you probably will find Crapo and Risch on board. To do otherwise, say economists on the left and right, translates into \$128 billion hit on the tepid economy and the loss of 978,000 jobs.

But not, it seems, if it requires the haves to share with the have-nots.

JEERS ... to the U.S. Attorney Wendy J. Olson of Idaho. It's been nearly 14 months since somebody fired gunshots at Hillcrest Aircraft helicopter pilot Earl Palmer while he was performing controlled burn work over Potlatch Corp. forest land in Shoshone County.

As the Tribune's David Johnson reports, two bullets struck Palmer's copter; two more came close. Palmer was forced to make an emergency landing.

It's been more than six months since the FBI completed its investigation, identified a suspect and turned the case over to Olson's office.

And now?

Good luck getting an answer from the U.S. attorney's office. Spokeswoman Pam Bearg won't even confirm a case is pending. - M.T.