

Cheers and Jeers: The year-end edition



By Marty Trillhaase The Lewiston Tribune | [0 comments](#)

CHEERS ... to Sen. Mike Crapo and Congressman Mike Simpson, both R-Idaho. In a year marked by partisan back-stabbing and intransigence about the national debt, Crapo and Simpson stood apart - if only to put the country's best interests first.

The country is spending \$1.2 trillion more than it takes in. Everybody knows what the solution will be. Services are going to be cut. Taxes are going up. It's going to take a balance. Taxes are at a historically low share of the economy; spending is at a historic high.

Democrats are tied to entitlements. Republicans are bound to anti-tax guru Grover Norquist's pledge never to raise taxes.

So give Crapo and Simpson credit for trying to break the orthodoxy logjam.

First, as part of the Bowles-Simpson deficit commission and then later as a member of the "gang of six," Crapo acknowledged the need to at least raise more revenues by eliminating some loopholes and then lowering the overall rates.

Before the super committee stalled, Simpson joined 40 House Republicans and 60 House Democrats in calling for a package of \$4 trillion to \$6 trillion between both cuts and more revenues during the next 10 years. He, too, acknowledged the revenue side of the equation.

If you want a long career in Washington, D.C., this is not the thing to do.

If you want to resolve a legitimate threat to your child's future, however, it is the thing to do.

JEERS ... to Idaho schools Superintendent Tom Luna. The man whose education overhaul package set the state's agenda in 2011 also set a new low for political fraud.

Shall we count the ways?

- As he sought a second term throughout 2010, Luna presented himself as a consensus builder. Even if they didn't like his ideas, teachers had to admit they'd been consulted. And Luna wasn't shy about challenging his own Republican Party to adequately fund public schools.

As soon as the election was passed, he struck without warning, scuttling teacher collective bargaining rights and tenure. He sought merit pay. And he pursued the most aggressive program of online instruction - funded by money meant for teacher salaries - in the country.

- When teachers began mobilizing to put his overhaul package on next year's ballot, Luna resorted to threats. Luna suggested teachers were engaging in politics on school grounds and warned them they could lose their certification as a result.
- After the State Land Board drew fire for investing in a Boise storage shed business, Luna - who serves on that board - claimed he was in the dark: "I don't think anybody thought we were buying the business. I thought we were purchasing a piece of commercial property. I thought it was vacant land, that it was another piece of commercial property similar to acquisitions made in the past."

Included in the information packet Lands Department staffers provided Luna were photographs of the storage facilities and a breakdown of how much rent each kind of unit generated. How did he miss that?

- In an interview with the Idaho Freedom Foundation's IdahoReporter.com, Luna engaged in more revisionism, contending he talked about his reform agenda "over and over and over as a candidate." Nobody else remembers it that way.

CHEERS ... to Washington Secretary of State Sam Reed and State Auditor Brian Sonntag. Reed, a Republican, and Sonntag, a Democrat, are retiring next year.

Reed has been impeccable as guardian of the electoral franchise. It was Reed who championed the top two primary when the courts overturned Washington's traditional blanket primary.

It's been Reed who pioneered Washington's vote-by-mail system.

It was Reed who successfully pressed the courts to recognize the public's right to know the names of people behind ballot measures.

And it was Reed who oversaw multiple ballot recounts in the 2004 gubernatorial election between Republican Dino Rossi and Democrat Chris Gregoire. The courts ultimately certified Reed's findings, which elected Gregoire - much to the chagrin of members of Reed's own party.

The hallmark of Sonntag's five terms in office has been the performance audit. Stymied by the politicians in Olympia, Sonntag turned to the voters, and they approved a ballot measure that gave him authority to shine the spotlight on how government operates - and how it might improve.

One such audit exposed how much more money the state might earn in by privatizing its liquor operation, a move voters embraced this year.

Another suggested the cash-strapped state would benefit by offering tax delinquents the chance to pay up without interest or penalties. This year's tax amnesty netted Washington state and local government a \$321 million windfall.

JEERS ... to Idaho House Speaker Lawrence Denney, R-Midvale. The ethically challenged speaker had a banner year. Here's a sample:

- He single-handedly blocked the House Revenue and Taxation Committee from even exploring the idea of joining a multi-state consortium pledged to help states collect the millions in sales tax due on Internet and catalog transactions.
- After all but looking the other way at tax scofflaw and timber thief Rep. Phil Hart's transgressions, Denney pushed through new rules to keep preliminary investigations of legislator ethics violations out of the public view.
- Which was convenient, considering the next blow-up involved Denney's colleague, State Affairs Committee Chairman Tom Loertscher, R-Iona. A bill that might have hampered Loertscher's side of a road abandonment dispute in Bonneville County went from the House Transportation Committee, where it belonged, to Loertscher's desk drawer, where it disappeared. Denney arranged the re-routing.

Although House ethics rules forbid a member from using his office for "personal gain, benefit or advantage," Denney declared no ethics violation had occurred.

Again, convenient considering the speaker's fingerprints may be found on part of the case record.

- Loertscher apparently can do no wrong. But woe to the moderate who chairs a committee in Denney's House. In the closing hours of the session, he unceremoniously dumped Rep. Tom Trail, R-Moscow, at Agricultural Affairs and Rep. Leon Smith, R-Twin Falls, at Transportation.

Their offense? They were too independent.

JEERS ... to Corrections Corporation of America. Hired to manage the Idaho Correctional Center near Boise, this company is guilty of blatantly putting profits ahead of the health and safety of inmates - and the interests of the taxpayers.

Here's just a recap:

- Dubbed the "gladiator school" because of unrelenting inmate-on-inmate violence, ICC has four times more inmate beatings than the rest of the state prison network combined.
- The Associated Press released video showing CCA guards standing by while an inmate beat Hanni Elabed so severely he suffered permanent brain damage.
- The FBI is looking into whether guards and staff at the CCA-managed Idaho prison had engaged in criminal misconduct.
- CCA settled two lawsuits stemming from the gladiator school allegations. It won't say how much of inmate Marlin Riggs' claim it paid. Riggs, who got beaten despite his pleas for help, was seeking \$155 million in damages. In a separate class-action suit, CCA essentially pleaded guilty to placing inmates at risk through understaffing, not investigating prisoner beatings, not training its staff adequately and not separating vulnerable inmates from predators.

Just in case you think this is saving taxpayers money, consider an Arizona study that revealed states actually lose about \$1,600 per inmate when prisons are privately managed. Because private contractors cherry-pick the inmates who are easiest and cheapest to warehouse, they leave the hard cases and higher costs to the publicly operated prisons.

By that measure, CCA's system drives up Idaho costs by around 4 percent.

JEERS ... to state Rep. Marv Hagedorn, R-Meridian. With Moscow still reeling from the Aug. 22 murder-suicide of University of Idaho graduate student Katy Benoit and UI psychology professor Ernesto Bustamante, Hagedorn decided to play politics.

Had Bustamante taken a gun safety class, none of this would have happened, Hagedorn wrote UI President Duane Nellis.

Teaching gun safety "could have possibly served as a deterrent to the shooter had he really understood what the misuse of his gun really meant to her and her family as well as his," Hagedorn wrote.

The lawmaker was responding to Nellis' expression of deep commitment "to keeping our students safe and preparing them for a bright future. That is certainty."

Countered Hagedorn: "Then I would recommend that instead of running away from the Second Amendment of our nation's Constitution and the Constitution of Idaho, that the U of I use this terrible experience to embrace them both and start teaching gun safety and proper use that ALWAYS includes the ugly side of the misuse of a gun such as has happened in this case. We live in a nation that, like it or not, clearly sites (sic) individual gun rights in our constitutions and the courts have upheld the support of those rights.

"We don't hesitate to teach our children the privilege of driving, yet we continue to hesitate to teach them the responsibilities remitted to them via these founding documents. Proper education could have possibly served as a deterrent to the shooter had he really understood what the misuse of his gun really meant to her and her family as well as his. ... Education is always better than sticking one's head in the sand and hoping people use common sense and unlearned logic to get through life. ... You know this to be true."

Keep in mind Hagedorn was shooting off his mouth - forgive the pun - before it was widely known that Bustamante had 11 weapons with him that night or that he had been prescribed powerful psychotropic drugs or that he had once threatened to shoot students in class or that he had threatened Benoit three times with a handgun.

CHEERS ... to Idaho's second Citizens Redistricting Commission. For more than 90 days, the first panel charged with bringing Idaho's legislative and congressional district boundaries in sync with its population growth bogged down in partisan acrimony.

When the second panel was constituted, hopes for success weren't much higher. Among this panel's six appointees were some serious partisans: former Sen. Ron Beitelspacher, D-Grangeville; former Rep. Dolores Crow, R-Nampa; Boise Democratic consultant Shauneen Grange; and Idaho Falls Republican organizer Sheila Olsen.

Then a funny thing happened. They began working together. They ate meals together. They met in a more informal setting. And they cut deals.

In 16 days, with no fanfare, they produced unanimous support for a new 35-district legislative plan. Then Beitelspacher joined the three Republicans to equalize the congressional districts by moving more of Ada County's voters into the 2nd Congressional District.

No plan is perfect but this one has an unmistakable logic to it. It falls within U.S. Supreme Court one-person, one-vote guidelines. There's no hint of favoritism. Democrats, moderate Republicans and conservatives all felt some pain - not the least of

whom was Speaker Denney, who was thrown into a district with four other incumbents, such as Majority Caucus Chairman Leader Ken Roberts, R-Donnelly.

CHEERS ... to the people who organized resistance to ExxonMobil's plan to haul megaloads along U.S. Highway 12 to Montana. Whatever else you may think about Linwood Laughy, Karen Hendrickson and Friends of the Clearwater, you can't deny the positive effect they had on the Lewiston-Clarkston economy.

Between the administrative delays, court challenges and just plain crummy weather, ExxonMobil opted to reconfigure 30 megaloads parked at the Port of Lewiston, making them short enough to move north on U.S. Highway 95 and then proceed along Interstate 90.

The project cost the oil giant \$500,000 per load. Specialized crews brought into the valley to perform this work spent a lot of cash on housing, hotel rooms and RV parks. They rented equipment. They hired local earth-moving workers. They ate at restaurants. And when these people weren't working, they were spending money on everything from fishing tackle to propane.

What would you call that?

Green jobs?

JEERS ... to the per-diem twins, state Sens. John McGee, R-Caldwell, and Curt McKenzie, R-Nampa. Idaho school children, college students, vulnerable adults and state employees are enduring the third year of the Great Recession. McGee and McKenzie are among lawmakers who made sure the state budget deficit is balanced on their backs rather than through new taxes.

When the time for them to sacrifice comes, however, these two sing a different tune.

Sacrifice?

Not these two.

Because they live within 50 miles of Boise, McGee and McKenzie have the option of commuting home each night while the Legislature is in session. That would mean, of course, that the state would reduce their expense reimbursement to \$49 a day. Most members live in Boise and get \$122 a day.

For some reason - whether they don't like the half-hour nightly commute home or they just want more money - McGee and McKenzie arranged to stay in the capital city nights during the session.

Not that they needed to squeeze taxpayers for the rent.

McGee stays at his parents' home.

McKenzie sprawls out on a couch in his Boise law office. - M.T.