

Hiding out

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JEERS ... to the Clarkston City Council. Mayor Kathleen Warren and the councilors had every reason to attend a community forum with the Asotin County commissioners.

Both sides have been talking past each other about the fate of the Asotin County Family Aquatic Center. The city canceled its annual \$160,000 contribution toward the facility. Without that money - which flows from a sales tax surcharge the county launched to pay for the aquatic center - the water park may not open this summer.

So the Lewis Clark Valley Chamber of Commerce arranged to bring both groups together.

For the first time, a broad cross-section of residents could explore this issue with their elected leadership. They'd get some answers about aquatic center management, and city and county finances while county commissioners and city councilors would have the chance to take the temperature of their constituents.

Although Warren and Councilor George Nash indicated they planned to go, at least two of their counterparts - Clee Manchester and Bill Provost - ducked behind the flimsiest of excuses. The city's administrative/intergovernmental committee recommended against participating, in part because having the entire council involved would violate Washington's open meeting laws.

How does an open meeting law interfere with elected officials attending an open forum with their own constituents?

In any event, the forum was canceled.

CHEERS ... to Idaho Gov. C. L. (Butch) Otter. If the National Guard Youth Challenge Program at Pierce gets under way this year, you can credit him.

Under this plan, an estimated 100 to 125 dropouts would attend a boot camp-style, residential school at Pierce. Clearwater County stands to gain about 100 jobs and a \$2.7 million economic impact.

Everything was lined up. The federal government agreed to cover 75 percent of the cost. The J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation contributed \$450,000.

However, Otter was reluctant to allocate state funds until last week when two key pieces of the package fell into place:

- Drawing from federal money Idaho collects as reimbursement for veterans services, Otter would renovate the old Pierce school and build residential halls.
- By designating the Youth Challenge as an alternative high school, the state Department of Education will provide ongoing support.

It still faces obstacles in the Legislature, where budget-writers have so far blocked Otter's plan.

JEERS ... to Idaho state Sen. Jeff Siddoway, R-Terretton. Along with using dogs and sheep as bait, Siddoway sought to give ranchers a free hand to kill wolves for 36 hours after an attack. After that, they'd need an Idaho Fish and Game permit. He also wanted to give ranchers authority to shoot wolves from an aircraft.

Do that, his critics said, and you hand U.S. District Judge Donald Molloy an excuse to restore federal endangered species protection to Idaho's wolves. Molloy is no fan of the state program or the congressional rider U.S. Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, and U.S. Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., passed to bring it about.

Countered Siddoway, "The argument that this would jeopardize delisting is wrong."

Siddoway should know better. He's a former Idaho Fish and Game Commission member and has six years in the Senate under his belt. But the second he placed his own concerns above the public's, he lost perspective. Siddoway, a sheep rancher, even acknowledged a conflict of interest - as the rules require - before proceeding.

Only when Simpson, Idaho's godfather of delisting, warned Siddoway about the consequences did he back off.

An emotional Siddoway pulled the bill Wednesday.

JEERS ... to the House Revenue and Taxation Committee. Wednesday, it deadlocked, 9-9, on a plan to bring Idaho's sales tax law into the 21st century.

All retail transactions - including those conducted over the Internet - are subject to the tax. But without federal legislation, Idaho can't collect. Idaho is losing at least \$35 million. The state's loss may be closer to \$100 million a year, says the Streamlined Sales Tax Project.

Plus Idaho-based retailers are put at a disadvantage because everything they sell carries the 6 percent sales tax.

It's going to get worse. The volume of business done over the Internet is growing five times faster than trade conducted at brick-and-mortar stores.

So Reps. Jeff Nasset, R-Lewiston, Leon Smith, R-Twin Falls, and Bill Killen, D-Boise, tried to add Idaho to the 24-state consortium now lobbying Congress to act.

They were no match for House Assistant Majority Leader Scott Bedke, R-Oakley, and House Majority Leader Mike Moyle, R-Star. Moyle is busy trying to lighten the tax burden of Idaho's richest citizens by \$35 million.

CHEERS ... to U.S. District Judge B. Lynn Winmill. Idaho's Republican Legislature and governor took one look at the protesters occupying the old Ada County Courthouse grounds and recoiled.

So these servants of the people tried to shut up the Occupy Boise movement.

They made it a crime to camp on state property.

Fine, said Winmill, who prohibited further camping or cooking on the public grounds.

But the essence of the Occupy Boise movement - tents erected on the lawn as a statement against income inequality - can remain. Politicians don't have to like it. It's called free speech.

Not only did Winmill thread the needle by relying on a U.S. Supreme Court ruling, but he combed through the Legislature's new law. In it, he found: "... the statute ... only prohibits 'sleeping' and 'camping' on state grounds and does not purport to ban the maintenance of a symbolic tent city which can be staffed 24 hours a day and seven days a week. ..." - M.T.