

## Local tax and spend plans deserve public outrage

By Wayne Hoffman

Is the economy suddenly so robust that taxpayers are just overflowing with money—such that local governments are again reaching back into our pockets for wads of falling cash? I'm just wondering because all across Idaho some of our government agencies are operating as if the good economic times have returned. It's a wonder no one has proposed throwing a lavish GSA-style party in Las Vegas.

I have three targets to share for the week, but I'm sure there are many others that deserve the scrutiny of a skeptical taxpaying public.

Let's start in Nampa, where the local school district recently discovered an accounting error that overestimated the school district's revenues by \$2.8 million—about 4 percent of the budget.

Don't be outraged by this, of course. The district is taking care of the problem through some budget cuts. All the while, the district is pursuing a tax levy that will drain \$1.6 million from the local economy. It's for the kids, so, please withhold judgment or outrage.

Were this a charter school, however, I'm sure the news media would be calling for the heads of everyone involved. Good thing that's not the case.

Let's see, if the \$2.8 million were not missing, but can be made up with budget cuts ... well, sort of makes one wonder about the rationale for the \$1.6 million levy.

Now, let's journey over to Idaho Falls, where the city is asking taxpayers to foot a \$1.1 million tax increase. That will finance pay increases for all city employees and an increase in the government employee benefits package, in which the entire cost of health insurance is borne by city residents. If that weren't enough, the budget also calls for \$200,000 to help pay for the city golf course. Bryan Smith, a businessman in Idaho Falls, is not happy: "I am one taxpayer who has just had it," Smith is quoted as saying in the Post Register. "We've got the worst economic times since the Great Depression and we're raising taxes so we can pay for golf," Smith said.

Yep, that's pretty much the case. But, Mr. Smith, at least you don't live in Sandpoint, where the city government, along with neighboring Ponderay, would like to put in place a local option sales tax. The tax would be somewhere between half a percent and 3 percent. No one really knows for sure. It just depends on how ambitious the local governments would like to be with their development plans. Those include plans for a parking lot, trail and park improvements, downtown revitalization (because apparently, urban renewal isn't enough) and street improvements.

"During your elected term, will you be satisfied with merely discussing the plans and visions for your community, or do you desire to provide voters with an option to fulfill these dreams?" asked city planner Jeremy Grimm, who obviously doesn't have to meet a payroll himself.

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Our economy is in bad shape. Still. Even during fantastic economic times, the plans being presented by local officials would warrant a healthy dose of skepticism. But what these three examples need more than anything else is impassioned and unrelenting taxpayer outrage and disgust. Maybe then, the government bureaucrats salivating over their grandiose plans for us will stop viewing our money as their money.

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