Siren call

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Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

JEERS ... to the Clarkston City Council. To pay for its money-losing, redundant ambulance service, the council has been blowing sales tax surcharge dollars that should be shoring up the Asotin County Family Aquatic Center.

The city collects around $500,000 in sales taxes. The aquatic center needs about $160,000. The city provides nothing.

Instead, it lavishes that money on the valley's only outlier ambulance operation. Every other community is plugged into a valley-wide cooperative agreement with the Lewiston Fire Department's ambulance service.

Clarkston's renegade status was highlighted by yet another consultant, ESCI, which last year called for a valley-wide operation.

On the heels of that report, Lewiston approached its counterparts across the Snake River.

Clarkston closed the door Tuesday.

By a 7-0 vote.

Without even hearing out Lewiston's details.

There's no need, said Councilor Terry Beadles.

Clarkston has a "top grade" ambulance. The city is satisfied with it.

Is it any wonder why there's serious talk about putting this city out of its misery by merging it with Asotin County?

CHEERS ... to state Sen. Jim Hammond, R- Coeur d'Alene. Nearly two years ago, he voted for the Luna laws.

But Hammond now agrees schools Superintendent Tom Luna's badly flawed plan for distributing nearly $39 million in merit teacher pay ought to be scrapped.

"I would like to see it go to the base, and let the teachers negotiate with their local school boards for it," Hammond told the Spokesman-Review's Betsy Russell. "Because I think it's disingenuous giving merit pay to people that don't deserve it. I don't want to do that to teachers."

Luna's laws distribute bonuses largely on how well a school performed on the Idaho Standards Achievement Test. If a teacher works in a school that tests well, it doesn't matter if she's a superstar or a slacker. She gets the same bonus.

Likewise, a truly exceptional teacher working in a school that doesn't perform gets zilch.

And it turns out the schools that falter on standardized tests are those in the poorest neighborhoods.

Unlike much of the state, all of Lewiston's schools got some bonus pay. Still, those with higher poverty tended to get less.

The trend shows up among the district's elementary schools. Camelot has the lowest share of its students in poverty - 33 percent qualify for free or reduced lunches - and the highest bonuses - $114,924.

But McGhee, with 58 percent of its kids qualifying for free and reduced lunches, got only $43,487.

JEERS ... to schools Superintendent Tom Luna. In a stunning display of arrogance and mendacity, Luna waited until he was safely re-elected in 2010 before undermining teacher collective bargaining, imposing a clumsy merit pay program and transferring scarce resources from the classroom to the purveyors of technology and online instruction.

Last week Idaho voters overwhelmingly repealed his program.

Now what does he say?

"This is a bump in the road," Luna said, pledging to press forward with his agenda.

It's hard to imagine Luna doing anything to rebuild the credibility with teachers and parents he so callously destroyed two years ago.

But here's a suggestion: Start with a simple apology.

CHEERS ... to Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter. Luna's partner in passing the discredited school overhaul, Otter struck the right chords this week by passing the olive branch to the Idaho Education Association.

The IEA and its parent, the National Education Association, were instrumental in financing the successful campaign to repeal the Luna laws.

With Otter attending the Republican Governors Association meeting in Las Vegas, the governor's staff stood in for him and held an initial meeting with the IEA this week.

"It's about a conversation and developing a road map on how we can continue improving our education system," said Jon Hanian, Otter's press secretary.

JEERS ... to state Rep. (and Sen.-elect) Marv Hagedorn, R-Meridian. In contrast to Otter's conciliatory stance, consider what Hagedorn posted on his Facebook page:

"The 'silver lining' in the cloud of Students Come First being repealed is that there is $81 million now available for (health and welfare) and tax reduction."

Idaho spends less per pupil than all but one state. A third of its school districts are running on four-day work weeks.

To cover state funding cuts, local patrons are paying $171 million in supplemental property tax levies.

But Hagedorn is going to show the voters who's boss.

Kill the Luna laws and he'll take it out of the schools' hide.

CHEERS ... to Boise City Councilors Lauren McLean and Maryanne Jordan. To them goes the credit for an ordinance that would protect gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgender people from discrimination on the job, in public accommodations, in housing and in education.

So far only Sandpoint has taken this step. Boise's vote is set for Dec. 4.

Thus begins a curtain of conscience spreading from one Idaho city to the next. Here's hoping Lewiston and Moscow follow this lead.

For years, the Senate State Affairs Committee has refused to even discuss adding protection for GLBT people under the Idaho Human Rights Act. - M.T.