

Who's bending lawmakers' ears? Not you

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Now ending its sixth week, the 2013 Idaho Legislature is shaping up as the "not listening tour."

Who cares if 74,000 people - 56 percent more than required - signed petitions subjecting schools Superintendent Tom Luna's flawed school overhaul package to a referendum? The Farm Bureau says it's time to gut the initiative/referendum process - and it gets a bill introduced.

Does it matter that 371,224 Idaho voters - or 57.1 percent - voted to repeal the Luna laws' assault on teachers' collective bargaining rights? Not to the Idaho School Board Association, which plowed right on ahead with measures re-enacting those laws.

So why is anyone surprised that lawmakers seem poised to ignore owners of more than 1 million residential telephone numbers?

That's the number of entries on the state's do-not-call list. You can't say that's 1 million Idahoans. Given the multiple number of phones in each household, it's impossible to precisely say how many people that represents. But it's still a number huge enough to shut down the telemarketers.

Remember back a decade or so when the dinner hour was interrupted four or five times a night by insistent sales people making their pitches?

Led by then-Attorney General Al Lance, lawmakers created the do-not-call list. People had to sign up, but it had real teeth. The first violation carried a \$500 fine. The second meant a \$2,500 penalty. After that, it could go to \$5,000.

The law still gets Lance's successor, Attorney General Lawrence Wasden, "attaboys" at parades and public gatherings. If there are any complaints, it's that the law doesn't go far enough,

Idaho's do-not-call list applies to commercial solicitations. Political campaigns and pollsters, for instance, still get through. As do charities. Also free to call you are companies with whom you have a business relationship - such as a newspaper that wants to sell a subscription renewal or a car dealer checking in on your maintenance schedule.

But lawmakers were careful not to extend this coverage to telephone and cable companies - for good reason: Since everybody has a phone, allowing telephone companies to engage in telemarketing would defeat the purpose of a no-call list.

For them, the options would be advertising, using the Internet or relying on the one place where they still have a captive audience - the monthly billing statement.

Now, however, Minnesota-based Frontier Communications and its Louisiana-headquartered counterpart, Century Link Inc., are taking aim at the law.

If they succeed, Wasden says, it would enable the phone companies to hawk all kinds of products and restore telemarketing to its disruptive pattern. Rather than sign up with the state, you'd have to tell the phone companies to leave you alone. But it's your word against the companies.

Frontier and Century Link have two influential lobbyists - Bill Roden and former state Rep. Jim Clark, R-Hayden Lake - making their case. So far, the score is telephone companies 2, Idahoans' privacy 0.

Last week, the House State Affairs Committee unanimously endorsed it.

Wednesday, the bill cleared the House 65-5 - without anyone standing up to debate against it. Among those voting no was Moscow Democrat Shirley Ringo.

When big business beckons, Idaho's lawmakers listen.

When it's you, not so much. - M.T.