

Putting the cherry on the cake - without the cake

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

The University of Idaho is getting poked from any number of directions.

Politicians would rather extend tax breaks to high rollers and corporations than repair the damage they inflicted upon higher education during the Great Recession.

Budgets are being balanced on the backs of students at a time when Idahoans are less able to afford it.

Student debt is rising and enrollment is flat. Not to mention the fact buildings and grounds are aging with no money to properly maintain them.

In southern Idaho, UI gets as much attention for dangerously intoxicated students falling out of buildings or freezing to death as it does for its research programs.

The president's office is a revolving door: Bob Hoover stepped down in 2003. Timothy White put in four years before leaving in 2008 to lead the University of California at Riverside. Duane Nellis this spring capped four years at UI by moving to Texas Tech University in Lubbock. Plus there have been three interim presidents - former Albertsons chief executive Gary Michael in 2003-2004, former UI College of Natural Resources Dean Steven Daley-Laursen in 2008-2009 and now former UI College of Law Dean Don Burnett.

The institution's drift compares unfavorably to an ascendant Boise State University, where the football team wins, the campus is expanding and enrollment is growing.

So what is UI's response?

How about new digs for the next president?

The institution is looking at demolishing the presidential home/reception center it built in 1966 for \$121,000 and replacing it with a structure costing about \$2 million. That's supposed to help attract the next UI leader. Plans go to the State Board of Education as early as next month.

Never mind the idea of a new presidential mansion has never been vetted among the public works projects competing for limited state Permanent Building Fund dollars.

Never mind the UI president already has the newest home among his immediate peers:

- Lewis-Clark State College President J. Anthony (Tony) Fernandez lives in a two-story residence built in 1905. Since 1925, it has served as the LCSC president's home.

- Idaho State University President Arthur C. Vailas lives in a house built in 1917. John R. Nichols, then president of UI's southern branch at Pocatello, purchased the home in 1938. In 1951, the State Board of Education acquired it as a presidential residence.
- BSU has no presidential residence. It provides President Robert Kustra with a taxable housing allowance of \$26,000 a year. Gladys Langroise left her Warm Springs home to the institution. Rather than renovate it for a presidential residence, BSU sold the home and used the proceeds to establish a scholarship endowment.
- Washington State University President Elson S. Floyd's residence in Pullman was built in 1912.

UI advocates no doubt would point to peers in other states where presidents reside in more modern accommodations. That's true. For instance, Montana State University President Waded Cruzado lives in a house constructed in 1979. The previous owner, Hank Gardner, left it to the university in his will.

Utah State University President Stan Albrecht's residence was built a decade ago. University of Wyoming President Robert J. Sternberg relies on a \$43,200 a year housing stipend.

Taxpayers may not totally be on the hook for this project. UI expects private funds to pay half, maybe more, of the costs.

But what does it say that UI would devote its time and energy to image-making rather than substance?

How many students or faculty truly believe this ought to be a priority? In a state where families are struggling to keep up with tuition increases, doesn't installing the president in a \$2 million mansion invite a political backlash?

And what about the presidential candidate whose decision to come to Moscow is swayed by the prospect of living in a fancy, new home?

Is that really the kind of leader UI needs? - M.T.