

Chilling out

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

JEERS ... to state Sen. Dean Mortimer, R-Idaho Falls. He wants to put the chill into Idaho's Office of Performance Evaluations.

The Legislature's investigative arm, OPE follows facts wherever they lead. For instance, OPE asked about 2,800 educators what it was like working in a state where Republicans had cut back school spending and tried - until the voters stopped them - to enact the Luna Laws. Reported OPE: There exists "a strong undercurrent of despair among teachers who seem to perceive a climate that disparages their efforts and belittles their contributions."

Next, OPE looked into whether the GOP's mania for cutting taxes helped or hindered the economy. Here's what it concluded: "Tax policy changes that affect Idaho's ability to fund such programs might improve Idaho's competitiveness in the short term by reducing business tax burden, but decrease Idaho's competitiveness in the long term by eroding the quality of nontax factors."

That's speaking truth to power, and if Mortimer gets his way, it will stop.

Mortimer is co-chairman of the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee - with equal numbers of Republicans and Democrats - that assigns OPE studies. Earlier this year, he suggested taking a sneak peek at the preliminary reports so they can be "tweaked" before the public sees them.

Which might come in handy as Mortimer becomes Senate Education Committee chairman.

OPE is about to release investigations on two troubled GOP education initiatives - a longitudinal student data system and the Idaho Education Network.

Coincidence?

CHEERS ... to the Asotin County commissioners, Clarkston Mayor Kathleen Warren and the Clarkston City Council. Their proposal to appoint Clarkston Police Chief Joel Hastings to complete retiring Asotin County Sheriff Ken Bancroft's unexpired term would make the best of a bad situation.

It would avoid conveying the mantle of incumbency on either Dan Hally or John Hilderbrand, one of whom will be elected in November to succeed Bancroft.

As much as possible, it also would limit the campaign's influence within the sheriff's office.

And it has the potential to build bridges within Asotin County's law enforcement community. Who is to say what efficiencies or epiphanies Clarkston cops and Asotin County deputies might discover in the process?

JEERS ... to the Nez Perce County jury no-shows. Monday morning was supposed to be the launch of a rape trial for 19-year-old Peter H. Bakker.

It didn't happen because only 42 of the 80 jury pool members answered the summons. Because so few people fulfilled this duty of citizenship, a trial involving not just the fate of a defendant or his accusers but the efforts of investigators, attorneys and expert witnesses has been delayed for another four months.

If three dozen people can't do this even much, what might happen if their country needed them for anything really challenging?

JEERS ... to Brian Judy, senior state liaison for the National Rifle Association. This week, Judy used the Holocaust to argue against Washington Initiative 594 - which would extend background checks to gun show sales and private transactions.

Specifically, he was challenging Nick Hanauer, a Seattle venture capitalist, who has helped bankroll I-594.

"Now he's funding, he's put half a million dollars, toward this policy, the same policy that led to his family getting run out of Germany by the Nazis," Judy said. "You know, it's staggering to me. ... It's like, any Jewish people I meet who are anti-gun, I think, 'Are you serious? Do you not remember what happened?'"

How do gun background checks even remotely equate with exterminating millions of people? That's grossly misreading German history.

And aren't you tired of people who slander the United States, a 230-year-old democracy, by comparing it with 1930s Germany?

But worst of all, Judy blew the dog whistle. Judy made his comments in the shadow of the 2006 attack on the Jewish Federation's offices in Seattle's Belltown neighborhood.

CHEERS ... to Idaho Congressman Raul Labrador. He continues to line up support for reforming the draconian federal criminal sentencing laws. Among the latest converts are House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan and the Washington Post editorial page.

Passed in the waning days of the Reagan administration, these laws impose mandatory minimum prison terms based on the sheer volume and weight of illegal drugs found in the possession of a defendant.

If you're holding 28 grams of crack cocaine, you're going to federal penitentiary for five years.

If you possess 5 kilos of cocaine, it's 10 years. Throw in a gun - regardless of who owns it - and you're looking at another five to 25 years.

Don't ask the judge for mercy.

Don't talk about different degrees of guilt.

Just walk away.

No wonder the number of people behind bars has jumped nearly 10 times to more than 219,000 - and nearly half are serving time for drug offenses.

JEERS ... to Andrew Moylan, executive director of the National Taxpayers Union.

NTU doesn't like taxing people for purchases they make on the Internet. But it shouldn't bamboozle Idahoans about the issue.

NTU's recent poll reports that 56 percent of Idahoans oppose putting sales taxes on off-site purchases. But look at NTU's loaded question: It suggested nefarious retailers from New York would gain the power to "audit and take into New York courts, online retailers who operate from Idaho."

Not so.

Changing the law would enable Idaho to collect Idaho sales tax owed by Idaho consumers on purchases they make online, from catalogs or shopping networks.

Until that happens, brick-and-mortar retailers within the state face a competitive disadvantage and the state treasury will lose about \$103 million a year.

How about asking the question like that? - M.T.