

If Crane dodges debate, assume the worst

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Each political season, Idaho's elected officials - from the top of the ballot on down - join their opponents on Idaho Public Television's Idaho Debates.

They may not like it.

They may refuse to appear at any other debate.

But the Idaho Debates have become almost obligatory.

Nobody blows them off.

Nobody, that is, except Idaho Treasurer Ron Crane.

Where was he during the three-way 1998 GOP primary campaign pitting him against Trudy Jackson and Barbara Bauer?

Or the 1998 general election race against Reform Party candidate Latham Williams?

Or the election four years later when Democrat Sally A. Beitia and Libertarian Sherwin M. Fellen challenged him?

Where was Crane during the 2006 campaign against Democrat Howard C. Faux?

Hiding.

Four years ago, nobody ran against Crane so he got another pass.

Talk about a perfect record:

Four campaigns.

Sixteen years.

No debates.

No problem.

This is Idaho.

Crane can fly below the radar screen because he's a loyal Republican in a Republican state holding a relatively low-tier job.

Until now, that is.

Crane wants a fifth lease on his Statehouse office.

And he has some explaining to do.

Such as how he made a conscious decision to pay face value for downgraded mortgage-backed securities - costing a pool of money he managed for the state at least \$10.2 million and possibly another \$17.4 million.

The transaction - unearthed earlier this year by legislative auditors - had the effect of stopping Standard and Poor's from downgrading another pool of money Crane managed on behalf of local governments.

And it violated his fiduciary duty to manage the state fund.

Such as how he has yet to answer legislative auditors' directives to look through his records and see if any other such losses occurred.

Such as why, when he's earning \$101,150, Crane billed taxpayers nearly \$8,000 to fill up his gas tank while he commuted between Boise and his home in Nampa. Anyone other than an elected official would have been fired and possibly charged with a crime.

Such as how he squired legislators and their spouses to New York City - sometimes in stretch limousines - on bond-rating trips, then folded his expenses into a contractor's bill that couldn't be tracked by auditors.

Such as how he spent \$10,000 on a "Smart Women, Smart Money Conference" without an appropriation or legislative authorization.

So far, he's resorted to name-calling.

His Democratic opponent, Twin Falls CPA Deborah Silver, is making "false accusations."

Editorialists are "biased."

Legislative auditors are "inexperienced" and "politically motivated."

OK, Mr. Crane.

Tell us why auditors - who work for a Legislature that is dominated by your allies in the Republican Party - are politically motivated.

If you did nothing wrong, why did you co-sponsor Senate Bill 1350 - which sets up a treasurer's advisory board and blocks you from making the kind of investments that the auditors tagged?

If the auditors were inexperienced, why did David Burgstahler, the Julius A. Roller Professor of Accounting at the University of Washington, tell the Spokesman-Review's Betsy Russell that he found the audit's conclusions "pretty convincing"?

But don't do it through news releases.

Don't bring in your in-house experts to buttress your argument.

Don't rely on media consultants.

Don't surround yourself with fellow Republicans.

Do something you've avoided for 16 years.

Show up for your televised debate.

Go alone.

Stand toe-to-toe with Silver.

Make your case to the Idaho voters.

If you don't, those voters are free to assume the worst. - M.T.