

Having it both ways

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

JEERS ... to U.S. Sens. Mike Crapo and Jim Risch, and Congressman Raul Labrador, all R-Idaho. As usual, they took the easy way out, voting against last week's \$1.1 trillion spending package - while relying on colleagues such as Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, and Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Washington, to vote responsibly.

Crapo, Risch and Labrador get the best of both worlds: They can take a stand against President Obama's executive order blocking the deportation of 5 million undocumented workers and preserve their pristine conservative voting index scores maintained by the likes of Club for Growth and the Heritage Foundation.

All the while, they avoid subjecting their own constituents to any pain. And pain there would be. Not only does the state rely upon the Idaho National Laboratory, Mountain Home Air Force Base and federal subsidies to its natural resource industries, but Idaho couldn't get by without the transfer payments - in short, welfare - to keep its low-wage economy treading water.

For every \$1 Idahoans pay in federal taxes, they get \$1.28 back.

Had Crapo, Risch and Labrador had their way, the country may have faced another government shutdown - or at the very least the loss of forest firefighting funds and \$28 million in Payment in Lieu of Taxes. That would have translated into a \$1.6 million hit in Idaho County, \$638,517 in Clearwater County. \$262,158 in Latah County and \$80,445 in Nez Perce County.

CHEERS ... to Idaho Freedom Foundation President Wayne Hoffman. Why, he wants to know, does Idaho's Legislature insist people from communities such as Moscow, Sandpoint, Rexburg or Pocatello brave the expense and risk of traveling to Boise in the middle of winter just to be heard?

Why, indeed.

"Yes, people can still call and email lawmakers," Hoffman wrote in a recent column. "But urban Idaho has a disproportionate say in legislative affairs because of proximity. It is important for legislators to be able to hear and see their constituents, to exchange ideas, ask questions, get answers and understand the impact of legislation on real people, real businesses, real communities. That's a flavor that can't be added with an occasional email."

Hoffman's suggestion: Follow the example Washington legislators set by using the Internet to link constituents at community colleges to hearings in Olympia.

Idaho could do the same - possibly by using the Idaho Education Network or by allowing individuals to Skype from home.

"There are 44 counties, 115 school districts, a multitude of digital platforms available to bring the Idaho Legislature home to the people, and the people home to the Legislature," Hoffman writes.

JEERS ... to Sandpoint Mayor Carrie Logan. Talk about weird timing. Just as Idaho Attorney General Lawrence Wasden was convening officials and people in her community last week in a forum about operating government in public, Logan was shutting people out.

Hosted by the city of Sandpoint, a closed-door session dealt with increased railroad shipments of oil and coal through the community. Among those in attendance: two mayors, representatives of the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality, the Idaho Conservation League and Lake Pend Oreille Waterkeeper as well as state Sen. Shawn Keogh, R-Sandpoint.

As the Bonner County Daily Bee's Keith Kinnaird reported, no notice was given and when Sandpoint resident Randy Stolz tried to attend, he was given the boot.

Logan justified it because "no actions were taken. It was just an informational meeting trying to clarify and identify risks."

That's taking refuge in the technical language of Idaho's Open Meeting Law.

Where's the compelling need for secrecy? This is about expanding rail shipments, rights of way, public health, noise and lifestyle. There's nothing more public than a train whistle.

CHEERS ... to Cally Younger, Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's public records ombudsman. Her committee has a cure for what ails Idaho public records law.

You have the right to obtain public records. But if a state or local clerk refuses - or charges exorbitant fees - your only recourse is to spend money on an attorney and go to court.

Younger's panel would lower the price tag by allowing the ombudsman to mediate the dispute. If that doesn't work, empower a five-member hearing committee - consisting of two private individuals, an elected official from a city or county, a member of the media and someone named by the state historical archives - to make a binding decision. From there, the hearing committee's decision could be appealed to a judge.

"We think this could really make a difference in Idaho by remedying the biggest hole we have in our public records law, which is that the only thing you can do when you get a denial - even when it is a clearly wrong denial - is to hire a lawyer and file a lawsuit against your own government," says Idaho Press Club President Betsy Russell.

CHEERS ... to Idaho Kids Count Director Lauren Necochea. Supported by Kids Count, the Close the Gap campaign is urging ordinary Idahoans to support Medicaid expansion.

For two years, Gov. Otter and state lawmakers have ignored every rational argument in favor of accepting the federal government's offer to cover an estimated 80,000 low-income adults.

Taxpayers would save about \$90 million they now spend providing medical treatment to that population. Consumers would be spared about \$492 million in cost-shifting. The state's economy as a whole would grow \$4.8 billion during the decade. And an estimated 450 Idahoans each year would be spared a premature death because they'd have access to preventive care.

At the moment, Close the Gap is promoting the hybrid model devised by Otter's third Medicaid task force. Some of the federal dollars would purchase private insurance coverage for people subsisting just above the poverty line. Those living in poverty would get Medicaid.

But it's always been a debate of figures and abstractions. By citing veterans, food service providers and construction workers, for instance, who would get the help they need, Close the Gap is putting a face on the issue. - M.T.