

Cheers & Jeers: Hurdle cleared

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

CHEERS ... to Congressman Raul Labrador, R-Idaho. If anyone was in a position to block 2nd District Congressman Mike Simpson's decade-long dream of a Boulder-White Clouds wilderness bill, it was Labrador.

He sits on the House Resources Committee, which stood as gatekeeper to the 275,665-acre package's progress.

Labrador could have helped kill it outright, load it up with poison-pill amendments or, by signaling division within Idaho's congressional delegation, could give political cover to Simpson's opponents.

Labrador certainly gave some indication last month that he might do just that. He suggested Simpson's support was shallow and motivated merely by the fear of President Obama imposing a national monument twice as large.

But Thursday, Labrador made no objections as the House Resources Committee by unanimous consent approved the Boulder-White Clouds measure - a tactic that bodes well for the measure clearing the House intact.

Good for him.

JEERS ... to Washington House Speaker Frank Chopp, D-Seattle, and Senate Majority Leader Mark Schoesler, R-Ritzville. They sit atop the legislative leadership teams that once again allowed 11th-hour budget negotiations to freeze out the public.

By the time a \$38.2 billion biennial budget and a \$16 billion 10-year transportation program emerged, few legislators - much less ordinary citizens - had any conception of what the details looked like.

With the state facing a government shutdown if no budget passed by July 1, there was no time to allow the public in on the deal making.

"It should never happen; it is not acceptable and we need to be looking at ways to make sure that it never happens again," the Washington Policy Center's Jason Mercier told The Associated Press.

But it will.

Unless Chopp and Schoesler reverse course.

Why not, as some suggest, follow Utah's model of adopting a base budget - at 98 percent of projected spending - early in the session? If no final budget is adopted by end of the fiscal cycle, you avoid brinksmanship and the pressure to cut secret deals in closed-door negotiations.

If Chopp and Schoesler truly believe in open government, they need only insist on it.

JEERS ... to Idaho Gov. C.L "Butch" Otter. He's running away from his record. The Spokesman-Review's Betsy Russell stopped him cold.

During the weekend, Russell chronicled how Idaho's Parks and Recreation Department survived austere state budgets by relying on volunteers and more fee revenue.

But all of this started in the winter of 2010, when Otter proposed eliminating the department, splitting it between the state departments of Lands and Fish and Game.

Otter complained to Russell that he did no such thing. He insisted he was merely sending a message to an insubordinate agency.

Not so.

Russell dug up Otter's executive budget for that year. It eliminated state funding. It called for selling the agency's headquarters and property for a projected \$5 million. And that year's legislative budget book reiterated Otter's plans to "devolve" parks and recreation.

It never happened, in part because Otter and his team came up short with the facts.

One such detail they seemed unaware of was the deal Roland and Averell Harriman struck with then-Gov. Robert Smylie in the 1960s. To obtain the Harriman's 1,100-acre ranch near Island Park, Smylie agreed to create an independent, professional agency to manage parks.

Had Otter proceeded with his plan, the state might well have lost Harriman State Park, now worth about \$50 million.

Try as he might to play historical revisionist, Otter can't run away from the documents - or Russell's memory.

CHEERS ... to state Rep. Steven Harris, R-Meridian. As IdahoReporter.com's Dustin Hurst notes, Harris has decided to take a second run at reforming the self-dealing that allows veteran lawmakers to tap into lucrative state pensions.

Only they are allowed to credit years of relatively low-paid, part-time legislative service against 42 months of the high-flying salaries they collect if a governor appoints them to head up an agency.

And Gov. Otter has been doing a lot of that lately.

To run the Department of Environmental Quality, Otter named former Sen. John Tippetts, R-Montpelier - whose monthly state pension check will go from \$492 to an anticipated \$3,651.

To take over the Department of Administration, Otter picked former Sen. Bob Geddes, whose pension goes from \$1,052 to a projected \$2,972 a month.

At Department of Insurance, Otter named Sen. Dean Cameron, R-Rupert, who will see his pension jump from \$750 a month to about \$4,845 a month.

And by accepting Otter's appointment at the State Tax Commission, Sen. Elliot Werk will see his monthly pension rise from \$420 to an estimated \$2,596.

Earlier this year, Harris managed to get his bill passed by the House - twice - only to have Senate State Affairs Committee Chairman Curt McKenzie bury it in his desk drawer.

JEERS ... to Congresswoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Wash., as well as Labrador and Simpson.

Wednesday, they voted against a measure Colorado Democrat Jared Polis advanced to protect federal lands from being handed over to the states or sold to the highest bidder.

Granted, it was a party-line vote.

Most Republicans - with the notable exception of Montana's Ryan Zinke - opposed it.

But whenever someone stirs up the Sagebrush Rebellion, it soon becomes clear the states can not afford to manage federal forest and range lands without selling them off.

Which leads us to ...

JEERS ... to GOP presidential hopeful and Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky. Last week, he traveled to Nevada to meet with renegade public lands rancher Cliven Bundy.

Paul raced right past giving states ownership.

"You run into problems now with the federal government being, you know, this bully - this big, huge government bully," Paul told a campaign rally. "You would have less of that if you had more local ownership of the land. State ownership would be better, but even better would be private ownership."

Where would Paul get such an idea? From his Western states chairman, surrogate and representative - Labrador?