

# Cheers & Jeers: Something smells

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

JEERS ... to Idaho County Commission Chairman Jim Chmelik. Is there anything more repugnant than a politician who votes to take tax dollars for himself?

If some civic-minded individual brings him a complaint, perhaps Idaho Attorney General Lawrence Wasden can determine whether Chmelik has broken any laws. But consider this timeline:

- November 2014 - Chmelik and his fellow commissioners pledge \$5,000 worth of dues to Utah state Rep. Ken Ivory's American Lands Council. It is the third consecutive contribution toward Ivory's group, which aims to secure state control over the federally owned public lands. At the time, Chmelik tells the Tribune's Kathy Hedberg it's a better investment of tax dollars than spending it on his constituents: "I don't see the return on welfare, food stamps, (etc.) ... I think people want jobs. They don't want welfare."
- June 2015 - The Campaign for Accountability digs up Ivory's tax records for 2013, disclosing that he and his wife, Rebecca, paid themselves \$114,715 of the \$228,000 in membership dues ALC collected.
- June 2015 - The News Herald of Lake Havasu City, Ariz., reports Chmelik asking the Mohave County commissioners to "commit to \$3,500 to \$5,000" to a group he's formed called the Western Landmark Foundation based in Cottonwood to coordinate a drive toward gaining control of the federal lands.

When it's suggested Chmelik is horning in on Ivory's business model, the Idaho County commissioner indignantly accuses his critics of engaging in a smear campaign.

- Jan. 14 - The Salt Lake Tribune reports that Ken and Rebecca Ivory accepted \$153,000 from ALC dues in 2014, an increase of nearly \$40,000. The Center for Western Priorities of Colorado obtained Ivory's tax records, which showed ALC collected \$336,524 in dues - nearly 50 percent more than the preceding year.
- Tuesday - Chmelik and his two fellow commissioners, Skip Brandt and Mark Frei, vote to void the check they issued - but never mailed - to Ivory's group and redirect the \$5,000 as a pledge toward another Chmelik-led organization, the Coalition of Counties. Chmelik says he's signed up 13 counties in three states. He wants 37 more before taking action.

"There is no conflict of interest," he told Hedberg. "I'm just trying to put together a coalition of counties, and I'm not accepting any money from the county. ... I'm just trying to change the way things are being done" in Idaho County and other counties.

No conflict of interest?

If Chmelik can tolerate that stench, there's something defective with his olfactory bulb.

JEERS ... to Whitman County Auditor Eunice Coker. Three times in four months, her elections office has screwed up.

This time ballots for the Tekoa School District election were mailed to voters in the Oakesdale School District.

No big deal, Coker told the Moscow-Pullman Daily News' Josh Babcock. It involved only 11 confirmed misdirected ballots and cost \$5 to fix.

That's not the way Oakesdale School District Superintendent Jacob Dingman sees it. These ballots contain maintenance and operation levies vital to the schools and parks and recreation.

Given the relatively small communities involved, there's little margin for error.

"It doesn't seem to me the full impact and importance of this is understood," Dingman said. "The levies are a big deal."

In October, Coker's office omitted from 4,000 ballots a race for the Colfax Hospital District. It also sent about 700 flawed ballots to Pullman.

Running an elections office requires getting the little things right. You may see no more than 10 elections-related errors throughout Washington's 39 counties in any one year.

At this rate, Coker will blow that many elections on her own.

CHEERS ... to Sen. Dan Schmidt, D-Moscow, and Senate Health and Welfare Committee Chairman Lee Heider, R-Twin Falls. Credit them for the most pleasant surprise of this year's legislative session: the opportunity to urge your elected representatives in Boise to take the morally correct and fiscally sound step of extending Medicaid coverage to 78,000 of Idaho's neediest citizens.

Expansion would save taxpayers about \$173 million during the next decade and prevent as many as 800 premature deaths every year.

But the GOP refuses to go along, forcing Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter to suggest a state-funded \$30 million package of bare-bones primary health care that falls far short of delivering comprehensive medical services.

Before the deadline lapsed last week, Schmidt exercised his prerogative of drafting Medicaid expansion as a personal bill.

That merely got his bill printed. As chairman, Heider could have buried it in his desk drawer. Instead, he stunned everyone - including Senate Majority Leader Bart Davis, R-Idaho Falls - by scheduling a hearing on the measure Tuesday.

Heider's colleagues will have to confront the sights and sounds of real people telling them how this will affect their lives. What happens next is anyone's guess.

"Frankly, I think that's the best resolution," Heider told the Tribune's William L. Spence. "We hear the bill and whatever the outcome is, that's the outcome. I don't have a problem with that."

What a refreshing change from the heavy-handed tactics you see from other chairmen, such as Sen. Curt McKenzie at State Affairs, who won't hear a bill that doesn't already have GOP support.

Heider has chosen to allow the legislative process to work as intended.

JEERS ... to state Rep. Ron Nate, R-Rexburg. Nate, who earns his living working at the Mormon Church-owned Brigham Young University-Idaho, doesn't mind spending your tax dollars on religious and private schools.

As much as the U.S. Constitution and the U.S. Supreme Court frown on that, Idaho's constitution is even more restrictive.

Nate's answer: Get rid of Idaho's constitutional ban.

Constitutional scholars such as David Adler of Idaho Falls say Nate's wasting his time because the federal separation of church and state prevails.

So why is Nate pursuing it? If it's a theocracy he wants, may we suggest the Rexburg Republican consider relocating to Iran.

Jeers ... to state Rep. Heather Scott, R-Blanchard. Earlier this week, a deputy attorney general had to explain to her the concept - embodied in the 1803 U.S. Supreme Court decision of *Marbury v. Madison* - that the U.S. Constitution is the law of the land and the Supreme Court interprets the Constitution. Scott was insisting the Supreme Court lacked the authority to overturn Idaho's ban on same-sex marriage.

What else doesn't Scott know? Separation of Powers? The Electoral College?

Such blatant civic illiteracy is dangerous. That's how we could end up with President Donald Trump.