

# More taxes

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

JEERS ... to state Sens. Steve Vick, R-Dalton Gardens, and Sheryl Nuxoll, R-Cottonwood. It's bad enough that the state Senate repeated the House's decision to begin raising property taxes on ordinary homeowners. But anyone representing northern Idaho has no excuse for voting the way Vick and Nuxoll did Tuesday.

Now on its way to Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter's desk is a bill that would dilute the Homeowners Exemption.

That measure exempts half the assessed value of a home worth up to \$189,400 from taxation. It's indexed to inflation to maintain its full benefit.

Next year, the cap is expected to reach \$200,000 - which is where lawmakers would freeze it. Each year, as the value of more residences rise above that \$200,000 threshold, homeowners will pay \$10 million in new property taxes while everyone else - landlords, businesses, farmers and industry - will pay \$10 million less.

It's a pure tax shift.

Areas with more expensive homes will feel the brunt of it. Among the most affected areas are Bonner, Kootenai, Latah, Nez Perce and Idaho counties.

All of which explains why five of the region's seven state senators - Republicans Shawn Keough of Sandpoint, Bob Nonini of Coeur d'Alene, Mary Souza of Coeur d'Alene and Dan Johnson of Lewiston as well as Democrat Dan Schmidt of Moscow voted no.

But Vick and Nuxoll thought shifting more of the property tax burden onto the people who sent them to Boise would be a swell idea.

Why?

JEERS ... to Sen. Nuxoll. What ever happened to private property rights? Whatever happened to the free market system? Ask the Cottonwood Republican.

Stimson Lumber Co., of Portland, Ore., owns about 13,000 acres of timber land near Sandpoint. It includes wetlands, lakes and the headwaters of Hoodoo Creek, prime habitat for birds, elk, deer and fish.

If they wanted, the owners could transform the acreage into a 1,200-home development with two golf courses. Instead, they have offered to sell their development rights.

Such conservation easements have preserved many of Idaho's finest vistas - from the South Fork of the Snake River in eastern Idaho to the Sawtooth National Recreation Area in the central part of the state, and the lower Salmon River Canyon from Hammer Creek to its confluence with the Snake River.

It usually keeps lands in production, maintains tax rolls and assures public access. But it doesn't happen without a willing seller and a willing buyer.

In this case, Stimson Lumber is so willing that it essentially contributed \$3.125 million toward the project.

The nonprofit Trust for Public Land would put up \$2 million. The U.S. Forest Service's Forest Legacy program and the Pittman-Robertson excise tax collected on firearm and ammunition purchases will provide the rest.

The federal dollars are flowing through the Idaho Department of Lands and the Fish and Game Department. So the Legislature must sign off on the arrangement.

Nothing doing, said Nuxoll, who last week unsuccessfully tried to scuttle the deal.

"I agree that we should be protecting our forest lands," Nuxoll said. "I also know that the Forest Legacy program is promoted by the environmental groups, which is great in some ways, but keeping the land in perpetuity is limiting the freedom of choice for our children and grandchildren and free-market economy."

How do you justify government interference with private property rights in the name of free enterprise?

CHEERS ... to Sen. Johnson. Wednesday, he stood up for local control and common sense.

At the behest of the corporate-financed American Legislative Exchange Council, Idaho lawmakers are trying to stop voters, their city councilors or county commissioners from banning, regulating or taxing plastic bags, Styrofoam products or other boxes and bottles that are designed for "one-time use or for transporting merchandise or food ..."

No Idaho community has taken that step. Hailey voters rejected a plastic bag ban initiative in 2011 and the Blackfoot City Council turned thumbs down on the idea last year. But the all-knowing Idaho Legislature wants to make certain no community even experiments with it.

As Lewiston's solid waste manager, Johnson knows this issue better than most.

"I'm really not comfortable with telling the local counties they can't regulate their solid waste," he said.

Unfortunately, Johnson's expertise was no match for the influence of ALEC, the Hilex Poly Co. of Jerome and the arrogance of state lawmakers who believe all wisdom flows from under the state Capitol Dome.

The Senate Local Government and Taxation Committee extended its seal of approval by a 5-4 vote.

JEERS ... to Senate Health and Welfare Committee Chairman Lee Heider, R-Twin Falls. For the second time this year, Heider has dropped the ball. First it was his truncated hearing on expanding Medicaid to 78,000 working poor Idahoans. Now it's abused children that Heider is leaving behind.

Earlier this year, Heider promised Rep. John Gannon, D-Boise, he would get a hearing on a measure to require all parents to seek medical treatment for their ailing children.

Idaho's faith-healing exemption has real victims. Gov. Otter's Task Force on Children at Risk documented two cases from 2012 - a 2-year-old boy who perished from untreated diabetes and a 15-year-old girl who succumbed from untreated food poisoning.

Three weeks ago, Gannon brought his bill to Heider. The Twin Falls Republican reneged on his pledge.

"I'm a First Amendment guy," Heider told the Twin Falls Times-News' Nathan Brown. "And I believe in the First Amendment, which gives people freedom of religion."

Another year of delay means another two or three children may die needlessly.

JEERS ... to state Rep. Pete Nielsen, R-Mountain Home. A tied House vote Tuesday had consigned Riggins Rep. Paul Shepherd's Orofino Maniac license plate to the round file, where it belongs.

This is a state where stigma of mental illness keeps people from getting help. It has a high suicide rate and a poorly funded mental health program.

Why make it worse with a term Idaho's mental health community finds offensive? Why set a precedent that could lead to a specialized license plate for every school in the state?

But Nielsen reversed his no vote and sent the bill back for reconsideration. The House passed the Maniac license plate 34-32.

Now it's up to the Senate to kill it. - M.T.