

Otter steps up

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

CHEERS ... to Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter. It was up to him to stop one of the worst ideas to emerge from the legislative session - cramming Bibles down the throats of public school students.

Tuesday, Otter did just that - vetoing Cottonwood Sen.

Sheryl Nuxoll's ploy to recast scripture as a reference book.

In doing so, Otter deferred to Idaho's Constitution, which says: "No books, papers, tracts or documents of a political, sectarian or denominational character shall be used or introduced in any schools established under the provisions of this article. ... "

Otter also listened to Attorney General Lawrence Wasden's office, which called the constitutional language "unambiguous" and advised lawmakers they were flirting with another losing courtroom battle - with the prospect of paying the winning side's attorneys' fees. So far, Idaho's Constitutional Defense Fund has defended nine such lawsuits - and lost all nine, burning through more than \$2 million.

Otter also stood up to his own party. All but two Republican lawmakers - Reps. Fred Wood, R-Burley, and Lance Clow, R-Twin Falls - voted for it.

Said Wood: "This is going to cost the taxpayers of the state of Idaho, I don't know, \$250,000, \$300,000, \$400,000. I just want my constituents to know back home, this is not a vote against religion or the Bible or anything else. What this is is a vote against needlessly wasting the taxpayers' dollars."

But those on Otter's right flank have little tolerance for the Idaho Constitution. Before the bill passed, Eagle attorney Christ Troupis argued Wasden's description of the Bible as a denominational text was mistaken. Said Troupis, it's really universal.

Nor was Nuxoll backing up after the veto. She wrapped herself in the flag, the Founding Fathers and probity.

Just the same, Otter's veto was not something you could have predicted with confidence.

This is the same governor who didn't mind spending \$53,000 of your tax dollars needlessly bringing in his own private lawyers to defend Idaho's unconstitutional ban on same-sex unions.

This is the same governor who has held his nose and allowed a lot of questionable measures to take effect.

He's vetoed only two bills so far this year.

It takes zealots such as Nuxoll and Troupis to force his hand.

JEERS ... to Washington state Reps. Joe Schmick, R-Colfax, and Mary Dye, R-Pomeroy. They were among 16 House Republicans who opposed helping Washington's homeless children with a relatively small \$2 million appropriation.

Their colleague in the Senate, Majority Leader Mark Schoesler, R-Ritzville, supported it.

The measure supplements \$950,000 in federal funds meant to help homeless children overcome the obstacles they encounter in schools.

Such as hunger.

Such as health and hygiene.

Or simply being at risk for becoming trapped in the cycle of homelessness as an adult.

Just the social stigma that comes with being homeless and impoverished guarantees many of these kids will keep to themselves and not seek help.

Last year, Washington's head count of homeless students rose to 35,500 - nearly double what it was in 2008.

Homelessness may not be as visible in rural, eastern Washington as it is in urban centers, but the 9th Legislative District is hardly immune. If nothing else, advocates of the homeless point out the region has pockets of high poverty.

Kids don't get a say about this.

Legislators do get a choice - and Schmick and Dye made a poor one.

JEERS ... to Whitman County Auditor Eunice Coker. Just when you think things could not get any worse in her elections office, they do.

First, there was the incident in October, when Coker's office omitted from 4,000 ballots a race for the Colfax Hospital District. It also sent about 700 flawed ballots to Pullman.

Then in January, ballots intended for voters in Tekoa ended up with Oakesdale voters who were deciding the fate of school maintenance and operation levies.

Now comes an astonishing report from Secretary of State Kim Wyman's office: Of the 74 areas Wyman's team checks throughout all 39 counties, Coker's office drew red flags in 20.

Nor are these technical violations. They go to the heart of whether voters can be confident that Whitman County's elections are being handled competently and honestly.

For instance, on Election Day, someone printed a tabulation of ballots at 11:16 a.m. - nine hours before the law says it's time to start counting votes.

"It is important not to know the results before voting is done," Lori Augino, director of elections for Wyman's office, told the Moscow-Pullman Daily News' Josh Babcock.

Then there's security. Coker's office didn't use seals and logs. Plus Wyman's office reported that on two occasions, ballot boxes were left with just one employee. If anyone tampered with those ballots, you'd never know.

And what about disabled voters who can't fill out a ballot at home and mail it in without some help? Coker's choice for a voting assistance center - Pullman City Hall - has problems with access.

Wyman's review is not some esoteric exercise. It's among the reforms Washington adopted in the wake of the disputed 2004 gubernatorial contest - which Democrat Chris Gregoire won over Republican Dino Rossi on the third count by a mere 129 votes.

If any election gets that close in Whitman County, will voters trust the outcome?

CHEERS ... to Washington Gov. Jay Inslee. He's banned all but the most essential state government travel first to North Carolina and then to Mississippi.

That's in response to North Carolina's law pre-empting communities in that state from outlawing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.

Mississippi's law allows businesses and government officials to discriminate against same-sex couples on the basis of a religious belief.

Inslee's message to those states: Practicing discrimination will cost you money.

There's also a message for Inslee's eastern neighbor. In the absence of state action, almost a dozen Idaho communities - including Moscow and Lewiston - have passed their own human rights ordinances. Legislators have begun pre-empting local authority on such things as minimum wages and plastic bag bans. They may turn to human rights ordinances next.

Here's hoping Inslee's actions will discourage that temptation. - M.T.