

Cutting in line

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

JEERS ... to Lewiston City Councilor Bob Blakey. His enthusiastic support for a utility franchise fee increase is undeniably courageous. The Democratic candidate for retiring Rep. Dan Rudolph's House seat just handed his Republican opponent, former Rep. Thyra Stevenson, a weapon for the fall campaign.

It's one thing for Blakey to put the city's welfare ahead of his own political fortunes. The problem here is that if it pursues this course, the city is putting its interests ahead of the community.

Lewiston is facing its fourth - and possibly last best - chance to replace its aging high school. When the \$59 million bond issue goes to the polls next March, it will require a two-thirds majority.

The last high school bond election in March 2011 ended with a 51.65 percent yes vote.

This time, the high school bond has one thing going its way. In the last five years, inflation has been kept in check while the property tax base has expanded. So the individual taxpayer's share of the costs has dropped.

For instance, the owner of a house valued at \$155,000 would pay - after factoring in the Homeowners Exemption - about \$9.36 a month toward the high school.

But by the time he faces this question, that homeowner will already be paying \$7.23 more a month in city charges - if Blakey and fellow councilors pursue the following:

- They've suggested boosting the Avista franchise fee from 1 to 3 percent. If the owner of a modest home pays an average \$150 monthly heat and light bill, his franchise fee will rise by \$3.
- Also on Public Works Director Chris Davies' agenda is a proposed 5 percent boost in water, wastewater and sanitation fees. For the typical customer, that could work out to about \$4.23 more each month.

Any bets on how that homeowner will vote next spring?

CHEERS ... to Mike Tatko, regional business manager for Avista. He's the face of a company that could simply go along with tripling the utility franchise fee in Lewiston. Instead, it's forcing Lewiston city councilors to put the matter on the ballot.

By law, the city can unilaterally impose a 1 percent utility franchise fee - which you pay to compensate the city for Avista's use of your public right of way. Lewiston launched the fee in 2000.

Several northern Idaho cities have higher fees - Orofino is at 3 percent; Moscow's fee is 1 percent on electric and 3 percent on natural gas, and Coeur d'Alene has a 5 percent franchise fee. Others, including Grangeville, Craigmont and Cottonwood charge nothing.

To boost the fee to 3 percent, the city either needs Avista's consent or voter approval in November.

Avista thinks you should decide.

Tatko wrote the council: "We've repeatedly said no, as we believe it is not our place to impose a fee upon the people on the city's behalf. It is our belief that any decision regarding a fee increase that benefits the city be decided by the voters, not the utility."

JEERS ... to state Rep. Ron Nate, R-Rexburg. First there was "Dumb" - former Bonneville County GOP Chairman Doyle Beck who wired himself for sound.

Next there was "Dumber" - Idaho GOP Chairman Steve Yates, who blabbed away while Beck surreptitiously recorded his every utterance.

Now comes "Dumbest."

After witnessing Beck and Yates get in hot water, Nate - who teaches economics at the Mormon church-owned Brigham Young University-Idaho - took a concealed recording device to a fence-mending session with Senate President Pro Tem Brent Hill, R-Rexburg.

Hill had supported Nate's opponent in the May 18 GOP primary, Madison County Republican Party Chairman Doug Ricks. Nate won by a 167-vote margin.

Apparently struck by the tone of Nate's questions, Hill asked if he was on tape. Nate admitted he was. The dialogue ended there.

When the Post Register's Bryan Clark got wind of it, he asked for a copy of the recorded conversation under Idaho's Public Records Act.

Nate refused.

The man with the hidden microphone accused the newspaper of violating his privacy.

After everyone from House Speaker Scott Bedke, R-Oakley, to House Majority Leader Mike Moyle, R-Star, said that Nate had proven himself untrustworthy and possibly violated House ethics rules, Nate played the victim.

On Facebook, he blasted the Legislature as a den of crooked politicians engaged in "lying," "cheating," cutting "backroom deals," and "party politics, cronyism and betrayal of the public trust."

Choose your next comments carefully, Rep. Nate. Consider the phrase: "Mea culpa."

JEERS ... to Idaho Department of Administration Director Bob Geddes. For the \$95,000 he's paid every year, you'd expect more than passive aggression.

About a month ago, the gay pride organization Boise

Pridefest asked Geddes to bathe the state Capitol in the colors of the rainbow during this weekend's festival.

That ubiquitous scene plays out at capitols and prominent buildings across the country. But in Idaho, they heard this from Geddes: No, you can't.

Political? What do you think? Geddes' boss, Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter, practically broke the bank fighting same-sex marriage in the courts and has stood by while the state refuses to ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.

That's certainly what freshman Rep. Melissa Wintrow, D-Boise, heard.

But when the Idaho Statesman's Bill Dentzer checked it out, Geddes added this: He couldn't produce the rainbow effect if he wanted to. The Capitol's lighting system is limited to one color at a time, he said.

When Wintrow pressed, Geddes told her: "I did indicate to you that I did not want to make the lighting of the Capitol a political issue. I still believe that is an appropriate decision.

"Since our discussion, I have received many emails and phone calls requesting that the Capitol be illuminated in rainbow colors. I have confirmed with my staff and as I responded to (the Statesman's) questions, the lighting system does not provide the capability to illuminate the building with a rainbow effect."

Pridefest organizers are free to project their own rainbow lights on the structure, he said.

Just a point of curiosity: Would Geddes remain so comfortably indifferent to this technological bottleneck if a victorious Boise State University Broncos football team wanted to bathe the Capitol in orange and blue? - M.T.