

Shadow players

JEERS ... to Mayor Jim Kleeburg and the Lewiston City Council. Let's be clear about something: When elected officials retreat behind closed doors, you have every right to be suspicious.

Idaho's Open Meeting Law presumes the public's business will be conducted in public. It carves out broad exemptions: to protect the privacy of employees and/or students; to discuss a possible purchase; or review litigation.

But if a council is looking for a reason to seal itself off from prying eyes, it can always cite this cryptic provision: confidential records. Apparently, that's all a creative attorney needs to pull down the shades.

Lewiston City Attorney Jana Gomez went for it. Since the "advice" letter she drafted to the council was deemed a confidential attorney-client document, the meeting was closed Monday.

Once that happened, the councilors got down to their real business - discussing a 182-day moratorium on any new homeless shelters. That's hardly in the spirit of transparent government, but the loophole is there for any group of elected officials with a penchant for stealth.

"This provision of the Open Meeting Law could be abused, and that would be a real shame, because the purpose of the law is compliance and openness, not finding ways to legitimize secrecy," Idaho Press Club President Betsy Russell told the Tribune's Joel Mills.

As if that's not bad enough, the city played hide the ball with its meeting agenda. Sure, the city amended the agenda to note the executive session - thereby technically complying with the state law.

Somehow, it never got into Mills' possession. Even if it had, the notice betrayed not even a hint what was about to be discussed. What would you call that? Bad faith?

CHEERS ... to Lewiston Councilor Bob Blakey. Here's betting he's in hot water with his fellow councilors. But Blakey just can't help himself. He has a knack for leveling with the public.

Because of Blakey, you now know these details about the council's closed-door session: The city's zoning doesn't address homeless shelters. Lewiston's Planning and Zoning Commission is in the process of filling that void. But any shelter that comes along before those standards are implemented would proceed without any oversight.

Hence the need for a six-month cooling-off period. The council plans to take up a moratorium at its first meeting in December. Until then, the details might have remained under wraps.

That is until Tuesday, when Blakey stopped by the Tribune to chat.

JEERS ... to Washington state Sen. Michael Baumgartner, R-Spokane. Why does Washington State University need President Kirk Schultz or even the Board of Regents?

It has Baumgartner available to take charge.

It's one thing - as Judge David Frazier found Wednesday - to question whether WSU broke its own rules in suspending Cougar football player Robert Barber after he was accused of assaulting another student last summer. Frazier's temporary stay means Barber is back in class and on the team.

But why does the vice chairman of the Senate Higher Education Committee feel compelled to supersede his judgment for that of a university president or the regents?

First, a grandstanding Baumgartner demands the regents and even Gov. Jay Insee reverse Barber's suspension.

"If you don't do something to fix this, I goddamn will," Baumgartner told the regents earlier this month.

Then Baumgartner presumes he's WSU's attendance commander-in-chief.

He's peeved at rumors that some WSU faculty canceled classes last week in protest over Donald Trump's presidential election.

"I'm going to be asking all public universities in the state to give me a list of all classes that were canceled," Baumgartner told the Spokesman-Review's Jim Camden.

What's next?

Is this guy going to start second-guessing student grades?

CHEERS ... to Clarkston Mayor Monika Lawrence. Tuesday, she helped corral all of the major players involved in the valley's emergency services.

And they started working through the maze that could lead to combining fire and ambulance services in the Lewiston-Clarkston Valley.

Maintaining Clarkston's budget-busting and redundant ambulance service remains an option. But two other alternatives on the table involve contracting the service with the city of Lewiston or annexing Clarkston into the Asotin County Fire District.

That's asking the right question. Although it is divided among several jurisdictions, the valley remains a single community with a shared purpose: Providing the best emergency services in the most cost-effective manner.

Why not find areas of cooperation and partnership?

CHEERS ... to state Rep. John Rusche, D-Lewiston, and Sen. Dan Schmidt, D-Moscow. Defeated for re-election, these two physician-members kept hope alive for more than 78,000 Idahoans.

These are members of the so-called "gap" population - working adults too poor to qualify for subsidized private health insurance but who make too much to qualify for Medicaid.

Rusche and Schmidt waged a lonely vigil with a GOP legislative majority so stricken by Obama Derangement syndrome that it refused to expand Medicaid coverage to this group.

No one was more persistent on that front than Rusche. The retired pediatrician transformed what had been a debate about saving tax dollars into a crusade to save lives. He refused to let anyone forget that extending coverage to Idaho's working poor was a matter of life and death.

For his part, Schmidt helped persuade Senate Health and Welfare Committee Chairman Lee Heider, R-Twin Falls, to hold a legislative hearing on Medicaid expansion. For the first time, real people with real health care problems confronted a group of lawmakers who heretofore saw this as a political equation.

Then Schmidt made it a question of hypocrisy. How, he asked, could a group of politicians benefiting from taxpayer-provided health care insurance deprive Idaho's neediest of the same? To make his point, Schmidt refused the insurance coverage his legislative office entitled him to receive.

No one understood better this creed expressed by the late Sen. Hubert Humphrey: "The moral test of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy and the handicapped." - M.T.