

Cut government bloat? Don't waste your breath

Jim Fisher/Lewiston Tribune

It must be a fool's errand to suggest there is one election campaign promise that is hollower than all the others, but that is nonetheless what I do today, if only to shout "Stop it!" at candidates who should know better.

The vow I speak of - to reduce government spending by cutting only wasteful spending - appeared yet again in these pages a few days ago, from one of the three Republicans already seeking to be elected Idaho's governor 16 months from now. Not surprisingly, it came from the only one of the three with no government experience.

It usually does. It takes someone unhindered by knowledge of the workings of government to say he can cut a certain amount of spending of government without sacrificing any of the public services we need and expect.

Yet that is what Tommy Ahlquist, a former physician and current property developer, says he can do.

And how much wasteful spending per year can he cut? An even \$100 million, he says.

Why \$100 million, and not \$93 million, or \$147 million? We can probably guess the answer: Ahlquist chose a figure more according to how it sounds than how much waste he actually knows of. He assures us that making certain "structural changes" to the state's employee health insurance plan will provide some of those savings, and spending less on building projects will provide more.

So how can less be spent on those projects without making them less sound?

"If elected governor, I aim to find out," he says.

In that, he sounds like my current state senator, Dan Foreman, now serving his first and probably last term in the Legislature. Foreman, who last year lost his bid to be the Republican nominee for Latah County sheriff, filled a vacant slot to challenge Sen. Dan Schmidt and flew sufficiently under the radar to defeat the Democratic incumbent in a GOP wave year.

Since then, he has earned notoriety by proposing legislation to charge women who abort their fetuses with first-degree murder - an idea so extreme he could find no committee in a conservative Statehouse willing to give it a hearing - and for voting against education appropriations in a district perhaps unrivaled in its support of public education.

During his campaign, Foreman came to my door, which impressed me not least because of the Dan Schmidt campaign sign in my yard. But that probably helped tell him what I might want to hear.

School buildings are crumbling and teachers need a raise, he said.

That means more money, I said. Where will you get it?

You can guess what comes next. Cutting government waste, he said.

I couldn't help scoffing. I told him I had heard that empty wheeze so many times I was tired of it.

"Well, you haven't heard it from me," he replied.

He had me there. He might have been resorting to one of the lamest pledges in the history of campaigning, but it was still new to him. It and nearly everything else involving politics, governing, public finances - you name it. Early in his first legislative session, he told the Tribune he could have chosen to sit quietly and learn more about the enterprise he had just joined, but he found that boring.

I have never met Ahlquist, but he gives every impression of being as impatient as Foreman. He pledges, for example, not only to "slash" state spending by \$100 million if he is elected, but to do so within his first 100 days in office.

He also began his campaign vowing to end same-sex marriages in Idaho, saying on his website that he "will fight to protect Idaho's right to define marriage within our state and support the current definition of marriage in Idaho as law."

As if the current governor, fellow Republican C.L. "Butch" Otter, hadn't already misspent tax dollars seeking to do that same thing, despite the U.S. Supreme Court decision already rendering the state's definition null and void.

In truth, if Ahlquist and other self-proclaimed scourges of wasteful spending wanted real results - as opposed to cheaply won votes - the best place to look would be at the millions of dollars state officials have shot to hell championing in court one piece of legislation after another that is clearly at odds with the U.S. Constitution. Even as state government has shortchanged everything from schools to state parks, it has always found money for futile court battles defending the indefensible.

But don't look to Ahlquist to propose such a thing. His energies will be directed elsewhere.

Talk about waste.

Fisher is the former editor of the Tribune's Opinion page. His email address is cfandjf@frontier.com.