

He's baaack

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By Marty Trillhaase of the Tribune



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JEERS ... to former state Sen. Evan Frasure, R-Pocatello. His launch as co-chairman of Idaho's newly ordained redistricting commission is a visceral reminder of why he's not been missed from public office:

He's a partisan mischief-maker who makes Peter Lorre look like a novice. Now he's sitting on the six-member citizens commission - half Democrats, half Republicans - responsible for redrawing Idaho's political map.

At Tuesday's inaugural hearing, Frasure all but declared open season on the Democrats: "This is a very partisan event. There's no getting around it. It's political bloodsport."

By Wednesday, Frasure produced his first deadlock - on how many public hearings to hold. Committee staff had proposed the panel run five sessions this month outside the Treasure Valley. Democrats went along. But Frasure and his GOP colleagues blind-sided them with a counter-offer - 10 hearings between now and July 1.

Stunned by the heavy-handed tactic, Democrats objected. Why, they asked, would Frasure and the GOP members not first discuss the options in public instead of provoking a confrontation?

Both sides agreed to a schedule Thursday - but if Frasure going to engineer a stalemate on something this mundane, it's going to be a long summer.

CHEERS ... to Washington's 9th Legislative delegation. According to the Washingtonvotes.org, Sen. Mark Schoesler, R-Ritzville, is one of six state senators who cast all 648 floor votes. The chamber's worst offender was Sen. Jerome Delvin, R-Richland, who missed 120 votes.

In the House, Rep. Joe Schmick, R-Colfax, was among 44 House members with a perfect record, voting 714 times. His seat mate, Rep. Susan Fagan, R-Pullman, missed 26 votes. In the House, Rep. Larry Crouse, R-Spokane, missed the most votes at 143 due to medical problems.

The Spokesman-Review's Jim Camden notes it's more difficult for a member of the Senate to get a perfect score. In that chamber, voice votes are recorded, so the senator has to be present.

In the House, members use a voting machine, so a member may leave the floor while instructing a colleague which button to push on his behalf.

JEERS ... to Idaho State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Luna. Remember when he released a memo to public school leaders alleging "numerous reports" of teachers engaging in political activity in the schools in violation of professional ethics?

The memo came amid a campaign to put his public school overhaul package - undermining tenure and collective bargaining rights for teachers while siphoning dollars now spent on their salaries into computers and online instruction - up for a referendum vote in November 2012.

When the Idaho Statesman's Dan Popkey pressed Luna for proof, his office released 25 phone calls and emails.

Curiously missing from the documentation of teachers allegedly engaging in political activity on school grounds was the case of Rocky Mountain High School teacher Shane Stevenson of Meridian.

Popkey obtained a copy of the email Stevenson sent from his district account to Luna's office praising the Republican's work.

"Would you be interested in testifying before the House Education Committee next Tuesday, March 1, as to the benefits of the Pay for Performance legislation?" Luna replied.

Nah, said Stevenson.

So Luna isn't opposed to all political activity on school grounds, just the activity that threatens him. Otherwise, why was Stevenson's email missing from the document drop?

"Those emails were not within the scope of (Popkey's) request," replied Luna's spokeswoman, Melissa McGrath, in an email. "He requested 'copies of all records memorializing these inquiries and reports' that were in reference to the statement that the 'State Department of Education has received a number of different inquiries from legislators, parents and members of the public regarding the propriety of political activities currently taking place on school grounds.' As per his request, the SDE provided him with copies of emails and phone logs from those inquiring about political activities on school grounds."

Uh-huh.

JEERS ... to U.S. Sens. Maria Cantwell and Patty Murray, both D-Wash. They sided with the big retailers and the big banks against the community banks and credit unions.

Under the 2009 financial reform bill, debit card transaction fees were capped at 12 cents. Fees had been based on the overall purchase but averaged about 44 cents per swipe.

Smaller banks and credit unions lacked the economies of scale to absorb the losses. So they'd either be forced out of the debit card business entirely or pressured to raise fees somewhere else.

Congress attempted to address the problem by creating a more lenient standard for community banks and credit unions, but the Federal Reserve, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation and the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency said the measure couldn't be enforced.

In response, Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., sought a one-year hiatus from the swipe fee cap in order to find a solution to the small banks' plight.

He needed 60 votes to break a filibuster. He had Idaho's Mike Crapo and Jim Risch on his side, but Wednesday Tester fell six votes short.

JEERS ... to Idaho State Rep. Sue Chew, D-Boise. Using her legislative email account, Chew contacted 800 addresses, including school teachers, promoting efforts to repeal Luna's education overhaul through a referendum.

She broke the first rule of public ethics - using taxpayer-provided resources for partisan gain. House Democratic Leader John Rusche of Lewiston admonished Chew.

For her part, Chew acknowledged the error. "We'll do things better next time," she said.

Now if only Idaho House Speaker Lawrence Denney, R-Midvale, could draw a lesson from this episode. - M.T.