

# In Idaho politics, drunken driving is no big deal

Somewhere between the two extremes - that state Sen. John McGee, R-Caldwell, can find some exculpatory rationale for his weird Father's Day behavior or that he can't explain it at all - is the well-worn path so many Idaho politicians and political activists already have traveled: a drunken-driving charge.

McGee, a member of the GOP leadership in the Senate, has one of the best pedigrees going. He's young. He's networked. Some see him as a future governor or member of Congress.

No reason a drunken-driving case should impede any of that.

Provided, of course, he can answer what he was doing walking around a Meridian neighborhood outside the Hillcrest Golf Course at 2 a.m., having allegedly commandeered a SUV and utility trailer, and then jackknifed it. When police arrested him, McGee blew a 0.15 percent blood alcohol content, nearly twice the legal limit.

Monday, he posted a \$5,000 bond for DUI, a misdemeanor, and operating a vehicle without owner's consent and causing more than \$1,000 damage, a felony.

Witnesses described the barefoot McGee looking as though he'd been in some kind of a fight. They quoted him as saying he was "in the promised land." The story went viral. Jay Leno made jokes. The London Mail picked up the story.

But he may have had a plausible reason for his whereabouts - his parents lived less than a half-mile from where he was found. McGee's defense attorney, Scott McKay, cited "medical explanations ... that may very well exist in this case that will negate any criminal liability."

If the felony charge against him disappears and McGee puts the lingering questions to rest - and does so quickly enough to stop a steady drip, drip, drip of headlines - who's to say his career won't survive?

This is, after all, Idaho, where:

1 Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter got arrested for driving drunk in 1992 and famously tried to pin the blame on chewing tobacco he soaked in whiskey. A 1993 jury didn't buy it. Otter went on to win re-election as lieutenant governor, then 1st District congressman and two terms as governor.

1 Sen. Edgar Malepeai, D-Pocatello, pleaded guilty to a 2009 DUI. His colleagues later elected him Senate Democratic leader.

1 Former congressional staffer and budget analyst Josh Tewalt was arrested for drunken driving three times between 2002 and 2006. He's now serving as the deputy chief of the Idaho Bureau of Prisons.

1 Jeff Malmen served as a top aide to Govs. Phil Batt, Dirk Kempthorne and Otter. He was arrested for DUI in November. He now works as vice president for public affairs at Idaho Power Co.

1 Former state Rep. Jim Clark, R-Hayden Lake, was stopped for DUI in 1999. He continued to serve until retiring from office in 2010.

1 Former state Sen. Robbi King-Barrutia, R-Glenns Ferry, was arrested for DUI twice in five years. Her second arrest came in 2002. King-Barrutia is now executive director and domestic violence project director for the Idaho State Independent Living Council Staff.

1 Former Lemhi County Sheriff Sam Slavin was arrested for a DUI in Boise, but voters re-elected him in 2008. A subsequent arrest forced his resignation last year.

However seriously individual Idahoans take drunken driving, they tolerate it in their politicians or political operatives. All they ask is for the offender to give a straightforward explanation and take his lumps like anyone else.

At least, when we're talking about the first offense. - M.T. (Marty Trillhaase, Lewiston Tribune)