

# Spending lavishly

Marty Trillhaase |

JEERS ... to Idaho state Treasurer Ron Crane. Crane spends lavishly. He's above the rules. He's entitled to live better than the taxpayers who cover his \$93,756 salary. If he hasn't crossed ethical boundaries, he's getting awfully close.

Yet voters trust this man to fly to New York City and handle hundreds of million of dollars? Here's what a legislative audit of Crane's affairs reports:

- Crane expects the taxpayer to buy his gas when he commutes between his Nampa home and Boise. No problem, says Canyon County Prosecutor Bryan Taylor. After auditors referred the case to Taylor, he concluded state travel policies - which bar state employees from charging taxpayers for commuting costs - don't apply to elected officials.

That's only an interpretation. Even if Crane's behavior is legal, fleecing the taxpayers at the gas pump isn't right, nor is it common.

- When he travels to New York City to secure Idaho's bond rating, Crane squires his aides, legislators and their spouses in stretch limousines rather than taxi cabs. Whether Crane is as profligate with lodging and meals - or that he's requiring spouses to pay their own bills - is hard to know because the costs are folded into a contractor's bill. Contractors then deduct their expenses from the bonding fees, thereby shielding the transactions from state accountants. No other state official can keep you in the dark about how he spends your money.
- When legislative auditors began to probe for travel records, they found some of Crane's guests spent too much on meals. Some spouses also improperly dined on the state tab, not their own.
- Idaho's anti-bribery and anti-corruption law says a state official can accept no more than \$50 in pecuniary benefits from someone with whom they conduct business. In Crane's case, however, it appears financiers in New York were picking up expensive meals for members of the treasurer's contingent.
- Crane funnels \$10,000 from his office budget to a "Smart Women, Smart Money Conference," that is hosted by a nonprofit organization Crane owns. He did that without an appropriation or legislative authorization.

Is Idaho's state treasurer serving the public or merely himself?

CHEERS ... to Washington State Sen. Joe Fain, R-Auburn. Among the four Senate Republicans who pushed Washington's gay marriage law to passage Wednesday, only Fain took a chance.

Closely divided between Republicans and Democrats, the Senate was always the bottleneck for a gay marriage law. Since three conservative Democrats had defected, the measure needed at least one Republican vote to prevail.

Four King County Republicans - Steve Litzow, Cheryl Pflug, Andy Hill and Fain - put the measure over the top, 28-21.

But judging from the 2009 vote to affirm Washington's "everything but marriage" law, three of the four have little to fear. Everything but marriage carried Litzow's district by 63 percent. Pflug's voters backed it by nearly 57 percent. And in Hill's base, the measure won by more than 60 percent.

Only in Fain's district were voters unwilling to support civil unions. They turned down "everything but marriage" by a 51 percent margin.

JEERS ... to Idaho House Speaker Lawrence Denney, R-Midvale. Boss Denney was mighty contrite this week. After losing a legal bid - along with GOP Party Chairman Norm Semanko - to fire former state Reps. Dolores Crow, R-Nampa, and Randy Hansen, R-Twin Falls, from the citizens redistricting commission, Denney found himself in hot water with his own 57-member Republican caucus.

So he went behind closed doors and implemented his plan to "apologize if I made any of them uncomfortable and explain kind of what I did and why."

Typical.

He forgot what every prior speaker knew to his core:

He's not the Republican speaker.

He's everybody's speaker.

The entire House elects him. He's supposed to rise above petty partisanship and serve as the embodiment of the people's House. He sets the tone for integrity. He serves the people first.

Not Boss Denney.

When Idahoans created their citizens commission, they pried from the stiff fingers of self-interested legislators the means to realign legislative districts to population changes.

Denney waged a frontal assault on that reform. Had he and Semanko prevailed, the independent citizens commission would have evaporated. Serving at the pleasure of their legislative masters, redistricting commissioners would have no more autonomy than legislative staffers.

Even worse, Denney was acting on his own selfish agenda. Before the Idaho Supreme Court struck it down, the redistricting commission's original plan would have forced Denney to run against four other lawmakers to win re-election.

Ironically, he got what he wanted, even without firing Crow and Hansen. The commission's new plan leaves Denney clear to win renomination without facing another GOP incumbent.

Where's your apology to the rest of us, Mr. Speaker?

CHEERS ... to Washington state Sen. Debbie Regala, D-Tacoma. Her bill to abolish the death penalty may be blocked in committee, but Washington needs to have this discussion.

In 35 years, the state has executed five people, and three of them dropped their appeals, essentially volunteering to die. Another death row inmate was exonerated on new evidence and freed.

If that doesn't tell you capital punishment in Washington is arbitrary, then this should: Gary Leon Ridgeway, the Green River Killer believed responsible for 71 murders, is serving a life sentence.

It costs \$2 million to \$3 million to execute someone in this country, three times the expense of locking him up for life.

Polls show emerging majorities supporting life without parole.

Last year, 78 death sentences were issued, down from 315 in 1996. The country executed 43 people last year, down from 98 in 1999. - M.T.