

Traveling man

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Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

JEERS ... to House Speaker Lawrence Denney, R-Midvale. Of all the people to send - at taxpayer expense - on a junket, Denney picks Rep. Phil Hart, R-Hayden.

Hart is among a contingent of lawmakers attending this week's annual American Legislative Exchange Council meeting at Salt Lake City. Denney also agreed to pay the tab for Rep. Vito Barbieri, R-Dalton Gardens.

Hasn't Hart already used up his cache of favors from "Boss" Denney?

Denney looked the other way while Hart, a member of the House Revenue and Taxation Committee, refused to pay his own taxes. Only after Hart gave him permission did the speaker remove him from the tax-writing panel.

Denney penalized Rep. Eric Anderson, R-Priest Lake, for calling attention to Hart's theft of timber from state lands.

Denney has tolerated embarrassment after embarrassment as Hart has claimed his elective office extends immunity from tax filing deadlines that apply to everyone else.

Yet here comes Hart - who the voters denied another term in the May 15 GOP primary - with a request to spend your money on a futile trip. Barring an unlikely special session, Hart will be a private citizen when any of the ALEC ideas come up for discussion in Boise next year.

And what does Denney say? Have a good time, Phil.

JEERS ... to Phil Hart. Why does a lame-duck lawmaker spend public funds to attend a junket?

Because he's entitled, don't you know?

Owing more than \$600,000 to the federal and state governments, Hart says income taxes are unconstitutional. If anybody insists, he hides behind legislative immunity until the courts say otherwise.

As soon as the government gets serious, he files for bankruptcy and offers to pay back \$200 a month - for five years.

When attorneys for the U.S. Department of Justice and the Idaho State Tax Commission probe his assets and liabilities - a reasonable line of questioning under the circumstances - Hart declares: "I decline to answer."

As far as stealing timber from state forest lands to build his cabin. Hey, says Hart, the law says it's OK.

Now he's in Salt Lake City, partaking of the latest political buffet - on the state's expense account.

So much for eating at the table of Boss Denney.

This guy studied at the feet of Boss Tweed.

CHEERS ... to Lewiston Public Works Director Chris Davies. This time next year, city residents may be writing monthly checks to cover their utility bills.

That will be a huge relief for thousands of Lewiston families who get pinched every three months by quarterly utility collections that are always more than they expected. It's even worse at the end of summer when the watering cost comes due.

As tough as it is on city residents, the system can't be doing the city much good either. It's a reasonable bet sticker shock puts more residents behind on their utility bills.

New computer software is one reason Davies is pursuing a transition to monthly billing.

Another is the advent of radio-read meter technology that transmits information to city hall. Coming up with the money could take several years. In the meantime, monthly billing may require additional part-time meter readers in the field.

None of this happens without city council approval, beginning with code changes later this year. But these are solid steps toward a more customer-friendly system.

CHEERS ... to Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash. At some point in their careers, 238 GOP House members and 41 Republican senators signed anti-tax guru Grover Norquist's pledge to "oppose any and all efforts to increase the marginal income tax rate for individuals and businesses; and ... oppose any net reduction or elimination of deductions and credits, unless matched dollar for dollar by further reducing tax rates."

But everybody knows the \$1.2 trillion budget deficit won't be fixed without a combination of spending cuts, entitlement reforms, whittling down tax giveaways and eliminating some of the Bush-era income tax cuts.

Unfortunately, the Norquist pledge shackles the GOP. Break it and the Republican politician faces assault from the right.

So here's the way out, Murray says. Unaffordable as anything other than a short-term response to the 2001 economic slowdown, the Bush cuts were never meant to last. At year's end, they sunset and tax rates automatically return to the Clinton-era levels.

"If the Bush tax cuts expire, every proposal will be a tax cut proposal, and the pledge will no longer keep Republicans boxed in and unable to compromise," Murray told the Brookings Institution on July 16. "If middle-class families start seeing more money coming out of their paychecks next year, are Republicans really going to stand up and fight for new tax cuts for the rich? Are they going to continue opposing the Democrats' middle-class tax cut once the slate has been wiped clean? I think they know this would be an untenable political position."

In other words, Norquist is irrelevant.

JEERS ... to the Idaho Transportation Board. First it fired the state's first female transportation director, Pam Lowe, on flimsy grounds. Then it outsourced defense of the case to Holland & Hart of Boise. Before it cut Lowe an undisclosed settlement check, the law firm charged taxpayers about \$540,000. And included within those charges was this bill: \$4,419 to ask Gallatin Public Affairs about how the Idaho media would treat the Lowe case.

Let's see: Lowe was the first woman to hold her job.

The board fired her after giving Lowe glowing evaluations.

Lowe contended she was shown the door because of her gender and after she challenged political and corporate cronies of Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter.

Do you really need to ask?

Adds the Stateman's Dan Popkey: Much of Gallatin's work was done by Isaac Squyers, whose father, Newell, was Holland & Hart's lead attorney in the Lowe case. - M.T.