

# Bill overdue

Marty Trilhaase/Lewiston Tribune

~~JEERS to Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter. More than three years ago, Otter made a bad bet.~~

Otter figured he knew more about forecasting Idaho's economy than the fellow who'd been performing that task for more than a generation, former Chief Economist Mike Ferguson.

In early January 2010, Ferguson projected the state would take in \$2.43 billion in tax revenues by the time the budget cycle closed on June 30, 2011. Experts quibbled around the edges but Ferguson's estimate was within the ballpark.

Otter arbitrarily lowered it by \$85 million. Conservative lawmakers reduced it another \$60 million.

As a result, Otter and the GOP could justify whacking away at public schools, higher education and health care.

At that point, former Gov. Cecil D. Andrus bet \$100 on Ferguson being right and Otter took him up on it.

Eighteen months later, the numbers came in. Idaho's economy generated more than \$2.44 billion in state tax revenues - or \$11.5 million above what Ferguson expected.

"I made a silly bet with Andrus," Otter said. "It's a payment that I'm very happy to make."  
[Emphasis added]

That was July 12, 2011.

As of today, Andrus is still waiting on Otter to publicly deliver a \$100 bill as promised.

CHEERS ... to U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder. Some will say Washington Gov. Jay Inslee and Attorney General Bob Ferguson came home empty-handed after discussing the state's pot legalization initiative with Holder.

Despite Washington's approval of Initiative 502, which legalized individual possession of small quantities of marijuana as well as state control over its cultivation, processing and sale, pot remains illegal under federal law.

Given President Obama's previous assertion that he has more pressing concerns than whether Washington - or Colorado - pursue pot legalization, Holder might have promised Inslee and Ferguson he wouldn't take the matter to court.

"He said nothing to show what direction he was heading or where he would like to end up," Inlsee said.

But look carefully at the questions he raised:

~~What would be the legal age for purchasing pot?~~

How would Washington keep pot out of the hands of children?

How would Washington prevent marijuana from being diverted into other states where it remains illegal?

Does that sound like an attorney general looking to overturn a voter mandate in the courtroom?

JEERS ... to Idaho House Speaker Scott Bedke, R-Oakley, and Senate President Brent Hill, R-Rexburg.

One of the genuine legislative reforms of the past two years was the legislative budget-writing panel's public forums.

For the previous 92 years, this 20-member committee heard testimony only from top-tier officials - representatives of the governor's office, department heads, university presidents and elected officials.

Then in the midst of budget cuts and a controversial set of school overhaul bills promoted by state Superintendent Tom Luna, the committee opened its doors to a public airing in 2011 - and did so again in 2012.

The response was thunderous.

Overflowing the committee's auditorium, ordinary Idahoans told the committee how spending cuts would affect them. For the first time, budget-writers encountered real people in their deliberations.

That's how you got more humane Medicaid cuts.

It's how Idaho found the money needed to revive its suicide hotline.

"In my opinion, those were life-changing events," said Sen. Dean Cameron, R-Rupert, who co-chairs the budget committee.

He was fully prepared to launch a third round. Until Bedke and Hill said no.

Don't worry, leaders say. Education and Health and Welfare committees in the Senate and House will hold joint listening sessions.

But only one group writes the budget. Why did Bedke and Hill just silence the citizens most affected by what that panel decides?

CHEERS ... to Idaho Congressman Raul Labrador, R-Idaho. He's pro-gun and has an A rating from the National Rifle Association to prove it. But give him credit for being flexible in his response to the Newtown, Conn., massacre.

Last week, Boise talk radio host Nate Shelman raised the topic in response to President Obama's plan to ban military-style assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines while also closing the gun show loophole on background checks.

"The only thing that I am open to is, I have been thinking a lot about the background checks," Labrador said. "I need to study that issue a little bit. I need to hear from my constituents on how they feel about it. We can talk about having more effective background checks."

CHEERS ... to Sen. Dan Schmidt, D-Moscow. He's raising a compelling question about the way big business is angling for a huge property tax break: Is it constitutional?

The Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry wants lawmakers to repeal the personal property tax businesses pay on equipment. Doing so would siphon \$141 million from counties, cities and schools and hand over the lion's share to a comparatively few large corporations.

Schmidt points to this section of Idaho's Constitution: "The power to tax corporations or corporate property, both real and personal, shall never be relinquished or suspended. ..."

An 83-year-old court case and another section of the Constitution suggest Schmidt's wrong. If the Moscow Democrat is right, however, removing the tax will require a constitutional amendment and that means taking the matter to the voters. - M.T.