

Just asking

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

JEERS ... to state Rep. Thyra Stevenson, R-Lewiston. If there is a cardinal rule in the Legislature, it is this: Never, ever challenge a fellow lawmaker's integrity on the floor. Lift that restraint and you will bury logic with vendetta.

Which is why - her subsequent apology notwithstanding - Stevenson's assault on Rep. John Rusche, D-Lewiston, was so stunning.

During Wednesday's debate on establishing a state-based health insurance exchange, Stevenson asked if Rusche had a conflict of interest - the conflict being that Rusche once worked in the health insurance industry.

Stevenson was wrong on the facts: Rusche left Regence Blue Shield nine years ago, hence no conflict.

She was wrong on the law. Under House rules, a member is obligated to disclose his own conflict. If a fellow member suspects the rule has been broken, she can raise questions privately with leadership, which could launch an ethics probe.

She was wrong on the politics. Rusche and Stevenson serve the same constituents. How does it help them for Stevenson to open a rift with her seat mate?

With Stevenson, this is what you get. Remember when Lewiston City Councilor Stevenson poked Mayor Kevin Poole with a conflict of interest allegation? Poole is an engineer whose company has done work for the city. While Stevenson's charge against Poole was baseless, it turned out she had a wart or two.

Or 37 warts to be exact. That's how many times Stevenson - a co-owner in an aircraft hangar - voted on Lewiston airport matters.

Not deterred, she now has played the little hypocrite a second time. Any legislator who crosses ethical lines by retaining both her city council and House seat has no grounds to challenge anyone's integrity, least of all Rusche's.

When asked about it, what did she say?

"It was an innocent question. Don't blow it up."

Really?

Rep. Stevenson, are you as buffoonish as this episode suggests?

It's just an innocent question.

Don't blow it up.

CHEERS ... to Rep. Tom Loertscher, R-Iona. When it comes to enacting one of Obamacare's most sweeping change in the Gem State, Loertscher has become the voice of reason.

Under Obamacare, Idaho can extend Medicaid to low-income adults. No state has more reason to act. Under a law Loertscher sponsored in 1992, state and county taxpayers now pay the cost of treatment for anyone deemed unable to pay his medical bills.

This program now costs \$55 million. Factor in medical inflation and rising case loads and taxpayers could pay as much as \$77 million next year.

"There's no end in sight," Loertscher says.

Unless Idaho agrees to expand Medicaid. Then, for the next three years, the federal government will pick up 100 percent of the cost of covering an estimated 80,000 Idahoans. After that, the state's share would never exceed 10 percent.

The choice comes down to expanding Medicaid and saving \$6.5 million in the next decade or rejecting it and losing \$284 million.

Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter shied away from this fight. Ever the pragmatist, Loertscher has not.

Thursday, he successfully introduced two bills in the House Health and Welfare Committee he once chaired - a measure to expand Medicaid and another to repeal the state and local programs.

It's late in the session. But if anyone has the expertise and the credibility to bring his colleagues around, it's this eastern Idaho conservative.

Good for him.

JEERS ... to the city of Clarkston. On Mayor Kathleen Warren's watch, Clarkston is threatening citizens who have the temerity to challenge its decisions.

Case in point: Connie and George Morrow want the courts to review what they believe to be an inadequate city response to their public records request. They want a full accounting of how the city decided to spend its share of sales tax surcharge dollars on everything except what was intended - the Asotin County Family Aquatic Center.

For their part, the city's attorneys want Whitman County Superior Judge James David Frazier to slap the Morrows with sanctions.

What good are public records laws if someone can be penalized for holding elected officials accountable?

JEERS ... to Lt. Col. Andrew D. Kelly. Commander and district engineer for the Walla Walla district of the Army Corps of Engineers, Kelly's office just released plans to dump dredge spoils near Knoxway Canyon, 23 miles downstream of Lewiston.

You have until April 11 to comment on the corps' permit applications to federal and Washington state agencies.

But here's the rub: The corps is still taking comments on its 1,400-page draft environmental impact statement on whether to dredge the navigation channel near Lewiston.

Why seek permits before the decision has been made? Or has it?

JEERS ... to Washington Democratic Chairman Dwight Pelz. Last week, he accused two-term U.S. Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler, R-Wash., of being the face of GOP intransigence on the budget sequestration issue.

But it's Pelz who spreads partisan vitriol while he preaches against it.

For instance, why hasn't Pelz mentioned Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash.?

In 2011, Murray was serving as co-chairperson of the super committee that failed to find an alternative to the sequestration.

If there's a way out of this mess, Murray - a senior appropriations committee member and chairwoman of the Senate Budget Committee - is going to have a lot more to say about it than a junior House member.- M.T.