

Deaf and clumsy, too

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

JEERS ... to Washington state Reps. Joe Schmick, R-Colfax, and Mary Dye, R-Pomeroy. With these two, political tone-deafness joins hands with legislative clumsiness. Case in point: Their mishandling of the John Wayne Trail.

As reported by the Moscow-Pullman Daily News' Josh Babcock, the two 9th District lawmakers literally sneaked into the state Capital Budget and inserted words intended to shut down a 130-mile stretch of the trail, which runs from Cedar Falls to Tekoa and the Idaho state line.

They were responding to some landowner complaints about weed infestations, crimes and dumping. But they didn't bother to consult with people who like the trail.

Those folks got a huge break when Schmick and Dye botched the job. Instead of shutting down the trail from Vantage on the Columbia River to Malden, their provision designated the closure would take effect "from the Columbia River to the Columbia River."

In other words, from Point A to Point A.

Judging from Wednesday's meeting at the Tekoa City Hall, Schmick struggled to answer critics who argued much of his depiction of the trail as abandoned and abused had been over-hyped.

"I have never seen a hiker - or a bike rider even - carrying a small appliance," said Martha Mullen, who said she hiked the trail six times last year.

Dye - recently appointed to replace Susan Fagan - adopted the Sgt. Schultz defense:

"I wasn't there at the time this was introduced. I wasn't there when it was developed. I wasn't here when the stakeholders were discussing the issues with the legislative body."

Here's a situation crying out for honest fact-finding. On that score, at least Schmick and Tekoa City Councilor Ted Blaszak will create a six-member panel - split evenly between landowners and trail supporters - to come up with a plan.

"I'm not going to plan on introducing legislation to close the trail until we hear from this committee," Schmick said.

Fine. But why didn't he try that first?

JEERS ... to Sens. Jim Risch and Mike Crapo, and Rep. Raul Labrador, all R-Idaho. Why is it every time this

nation even flirts with another government shutdown, these three climb aboard?

Twice this week, Risch and Crapo found themselves among the right-wing Senate fringe inhabited by Ted Cruz of Texas. They could not even muster more than one-fifth of the Senate to join them, which means they were out-voted 2-to-1 by their fellow Republicans, not to mention Democrats such as Washington's Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell.

Labrador was among 151 House Republicans who voted no. It took 91 Republican adults - such as Idaho's Mike Simpson and Washington's Cathy McMorris Rodgers - to join with all 186 Democrats to buy another 10 weeks before the next standoff.

If Crapo, Risch and Labrador had their way, where would we be?

Facing another self-inflicted economic wound. For Idaho, which depends on the federal economic lifeline far more than other states, the pain might be profound.

When you know people such as Simpson in the House and Murray in the Senate are going to vote responsibly, pandering to the ideological base of the Idaho GOP is the safest place to be.

Risch, Crapo and Labrador won't win any "Profiles in Courage" accolades. But they won't have to worry about keeping their jobs, either.

CHEERS ... to Idaho Senate tax committee Chairman Jeff Siddoway, R-Terreton. He's opened up what had been a stealthy legislative tax reform study group. That means advance notice, access to what the committee is reading and hearing - as well as the ability to listen to its deliberations online.

The next session is set for Tuesday in Boise.

The panel looking over Utah's flat income tax system got exposed last week for meeting in secret.

Word is, Siddoway was never happy with the arrangement. He was among the first to insist the work group step into the light.

"I thought we were obligated to do the open meeting deal," he told the Spokesman-Review's Betsy Russell. "We need to get this deal out, advertise. It's a public process. Whoever wants to, come. ... "

JEERS ... to Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter. What part of "yes" doesn't he get?

Anyone who's lived through the spotted owl and salmon-steelhead controversies bristled at the threat of another endangered species listing - this time, the sage grouse.

Had the listing proceeded, another layer of federal bureaucracy with a single-minded focus - the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service - could have restricted livestock grazing, oil and gas exploration and mining on 170 million acres of public lands across the West.

Working with governors such as Wyoming Republican Matt Mead and Montana Democrat Steve Bullock, Interior Secretary Sally Jewell devised sage grouse protection that falls short of a formal listing. The immediate effect will involve limits on mining. Public lands grazing restrictions remain to be worked out.

Whatever you think of the terms, listing is all but guaranteed to be even more onerous. Some environmentalists, such as WildEarth Guardians wildlife biologist Erick Molvar think Jewell is "squandering a major opportunity to put science before politics."

Not only is Otter blasting the deal - as many Western Republicans are - but he's the first out of the gate to file a lawsuit.

Another Otter lawsuit? Come on. Really?

After depleting the state's resources on everything from defending "ag-gag" laws to his own botched veto of an instant racing measure, Otter wants to lavish more of your tax dollars hiring private lawyers such as Linda Larson of Seattle and Thomas Perry of Boise.

What is it with this governor and billable hours?

CHEERS ... to McGhee Elementary School social worker Carol Richel. Take a moment to visit Emerich Playground and admire her handiwork.

Richel is the organizational spark plug behind a community-wide effort to replace the aging playground that many know as Castle Park.

Think about her as you contemplate about \$150,000 in contributions - including more than \$30,000 given in tribute to former teacher Judy Fong, who died of cancer last year - raised to buy the new equipment. Or the 400 volunteers who helped set it up.

Sunday, the park formally reopens to the kids who keep the place busy both during and after school. - M.T.