

Just like Hillary

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

JEERS ... to Ron "Crafty" Crane. Do you like Hillary Clinton? Then you'll love the way this Idaho Republican runs the state treasurer's office.

Talk about Hillary's famous sense of entitlement. She's got nothing on Crane.

As guardian of Idaho's credit rating, he's supposed to consult the Idaho Credit Rating Enhancement Committee. After all, these knowledgeable people are tied to the Legislature, the Division of Financial Management and state agencies involved in bonding.

But Crane - who burned up at least \$8.7 million of your tax money by covering his losses in mortgage-backed securities - obviously sees a financial Einstein in the mirror. Why else would he not convene the panel for the past six years?

Hillary likes to play hide the ball, right? Crane could teach her a thing or two.

So what if the Securities and Exchange Commission cited the Idaho Housing and Finance Association for reporting violations and issued a cease-and-desist order? Crane's responsible for issuing reports about those kinds of things.

But why alarm the little people of Idaho? Simply airbrush that information out of an annual report - and then keep the report largely under wraps for more than three months. As the Spokesman-Review's Betsy Russell discovered, only after lawmakers and staffers started asking questions did anyone think to tell the public what was going on.

Sure, Hillary is adroit at evading questions she prefers not to answer. But when it comes to stonewalling, Crane is in a class all by himself.

For a week, he dodged Russell's questions with the excuse he was at an out-of-town conference. Wherever he was, they don't have telephones or email.

After that, he simply declined to talk about it.

Is this guy good or what?

CHEERS ... to Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter. For the second consecutive year, Idaho's chief executive has eschewed tax cuts.

Instead, he wants to funnel money into his five-year, \$350 million education reform package, which notably boosts teacher pay. He'll be under pressure to relent. Idaho's treasury is flush with cash due to the state's improving economy. It's usually at this point that conservatives argue for tax cuts in order to keep government in check or - in the words of anti-tax guru Grover Norquist - "starve the beast."

"But we don't believe, never have, that using tax policy to starve government is the right policy to have," Otter told the Associated Taxpayers of Idaho annual conference Wednesday. "Tax policy should be ... based on what is needed."

What's needed, of course, is for Idaho to make up as much ground in public school and higher education funding as it can. Under Otter, Idaho imposed deep budget cuts during the Great Recession.

Unfortunately, Otter's word is seldom final and he's already equivocating.

"Have I got a plan for it? No," he said. "But I would tell you as soon as legislators see the revenue stream ...there will be plenty of ideas, and whether it's personal property tax or income tax or any other area, I'm willing to look at all of 'em."

JEERS ... to the Idaho Legislature's Medicaid Gap task force.

If you're going to ignore the plight of 78,000 working poor Idaho adults who can't afford health care insurance, say so.

If you're going to help that group, then say how.

But spare us the self-indulgent rhetoric.

For months, the task force reviewed what everyone already knows: Extending Medicaid would save tax dollars and lives. So far, it's fallen on deaf ears in a GOP-dominated Legislature that would rather resist Obamacare to the last.

"We've had a lot of testimony and we've all learned a lot," intoned task force Co-Chairman Sen. Marv Hagedorn, R-Meridian. "Now we have to carry what we've learned to the other 95 legislators. They have to understand that we can't ignore this issue; we have to find a solution."

So what's the plan? Apparently, there isn't one.

Can you imagine lawmakers taking that attitude about:

- Forest fires? - "We know the trees are on fire. We really ought to do something."
- Fixing highways? - "We know the roads and bridges are falling apart. We should think about that."
- Paying teachers? "We'll get around to it."

CHEERS ... to Cortney Liddiard. In an "only Nixon can go to China" moment, the chief executive officer of Ball Ventures in Idaho Falls told Idaho's political establishment it's time to liberate the state from an anachronism.

Idaho makes it nearly impossible to build a new school or improve local infrastructure because:

- It requires a bond to pass by a two-thirds majority.
- It provides no alternative to using the property tax.

If school superintendents, mayors or county commissioners make that case, they're given the legislative brush-off. But it's not as easy for business-oriented lawmakers to ignore Liddiard, who's been managing Ball Ventures since 2002 - and before that served on U.S. Sen. Orrin Hatch's taxation staff.

Wednesday, Liddiard told the Associated Taxpayers of Idaho conference that the state is losing ground to states such as Utah, Colorado and Oregon - where a simple majority can pass a bond. Its starved education program is falling short of meeting Idaho's needs for skilled workers. Utah spends four times as much per capita on infrastructure.

"Please don't throw anything at me, don't boo me out of the room," he said. "But perhaps it's time to seriously consider decreasing the two-thirds requirement, which would provide for financial flexibility and lower the barriers to respond to infrastructure funding needs."

CHEERS ... to Idaho Department of Correction Director Kevin Kempf. Give him points for keeping his eye on what matters - not punishment, but rechanneling people who have broken the rules into law-abiding citizens.

For instance, Kempf is talking about incorporating elements of the "open" prison system used in Europe.

Other than the fact that they can't leave the institution, European inmates retain their individuality, much of their freedom of movement and attend school or work.

Idaho will never be Scandinavia. But if it helps reduce recidivism, why not try?

"We're still dealing, at the end of the day, with inmates that are broken," Kempf told Rebecca Boone of the Associated Press. "We need to do what we can to make people better, not make them worse." - M.T.