

Not again

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

JEERS ... to Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter. Is it possible? Can it really be happening again? Could a man with so much government experience - four decades in public life, tenure in the state Legislature, a former lieutenant governor, three terms as a U.S. congressman and now in his 11th year as Idaho's chief executive - flub the rudimentary duties of his office for the second time in three years?

Otter made the right move Tuesday in vetoing the Legislature's irresponsible choice to lift the sales tax from food purchases without paying for it. That \$80 million budget hole on top of an emerging structural deficit could undermine the ongoing process of rebuilding public schools and possibly doing something to prop up higher education.

It all may be for nothing.

Reps. Ron Nate, R-Rexburg, and Bryan Zollinger, R-Idaho Falls, spotted a potentially fatal flaw. They say Otter misread the state constitution and blew a 10-day deadline for issuing the veto.

If you buy their interpretation, the clock started ticking upon the Legislature's final adjournment on March 29 - which means the governor should have acted by Monday. The governor says he had 10 days from the time he physically received the bill on March 31.

Otter may have a 1978 Idaho Supreme Court precedent on his side. But it's far from a sure thing. The court has changed hands many times since - and the current members may not be as willing to give Otter a pass.

Especially when you consider they've already warned him once. Back in 2015, Otter so sloppily handled a veto of the Legislature's ban on quasi-slot machines at Idaho's three horse racing tracks that a unanimous Supreme Court invalidated the governor's decision.

The court repeatedly drew Otter's attention to the "plain language of the relevant constitutional and statutory provisions, together with the undisputed and unambiguous facts. ..."

Having been burned once, what kind of person would even gamble a second time with deadlines?

It's not as if he needed time to make up his mind. Even before the tax break passed, Otter wrote lawmakers: "I see no reason to change our current system and I oppose efforts to do so."

Otter was so resolute that some lawmakers took the politically popular stance knowing they would not have to live with the consequences.

"We're now allowing the governor to be the referee or the sheriff," said Sen. Chuck Winder, R-Boise.

At least the last time Otter blew it, the impact was limited to one industry and the governor's pride. This is the kind of blunder that could hurt us all.

CHEERS ... to Congressman Raul Labrador, R-Idaho. Give him points for scheduling two town hall forums - Wednesday at Meridian and April 24 at Nampa.

Why, you may ask, would Labrador draw praise for merely doing his job?

Fair question. You expect your representative to check the pulse of his constituents during a congressional recess. It's also good strategy for any politician - especially if he's considering making a bid for governor next year.

But in the age of President Donald Trump, the energized left has been hounding any Republican brave enough to engage the voters.

As the Idaho Statesman reported earlier this year, Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho, hasn't held a town hall since 2009. Nor has he conducted one of his tele-town meetings since 2013. In fact, his chief of staff, former state Sen. John Sandy, famously locked the doors of Risch's downtown Boise office earlier this year.

After wrapping up the last of 200 town hall meetings last year, Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, has not resumed the practice.

Congressman Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, doesn't like the format and hasn't held a town hall meeting since 2004.

Of course, Labrador has chosen friendly turf in ultra-conservative Canyon County and western Ada County for what will be his first town hall meetings in almost two years.

No word yet when Labrador plans to take on a far more skeptical audience in Moscow, where a group didn't wait on the congressman before staging their own rally in February. Or, for that matter, Lewiston, where Labrador field office staffer Scott Carlton sicced the Capitol Police on a group of senior citizens whose comments made him uncomfortable.

JEERS ... to Sen. Dan Foreman, R-Moscow, and Reps. Thyra Stevenson and Mike Kingsley, both R-Lewiston.

All three were elected from centrist legislative districts - one of the few places in Idaho where Democrats and Republicans compete. In fact, all three replaced Democratic incumbents in last year's GOP sweep. There's no reason to think the results could not be reversed down the road.

So why are these three the darlings of the Idaho Freedom Foundation?

Let's be clear: Nobody takes a stronger line on civil liberties and holding the GOP legislative leadership to an ethical standard than the IFF's Wayne Hoffman.

But Hoffman's Idaho Freedom Index is skewed toward an extreme libertarian agenda. It favors ideologues. Ranked tops were Rep. Nate of Rexburg, who got 100 percent, and Sen. Bob Nonini, R-Coeur d'Alene, who voted IFF's way 93.1 percent of the time.

On the other hand, lawmakers who solve problems and keep state government on track don't fare as well. Among them: House Speaker Scott Bedke, R-Oakley, whose 49.3 percent ranking puts him in Democratic territory, and budget committee Co-Chairwoman Sen. Shawn Keough, R-Sandpoint, whose 45.4 percent score bounces along the basement of IFF's rankings.

Even some conservatives part ways with Hoffman's group. For instance, House Majority Leader Mike Moyle, R-Star, tied for 20th place with an 81.3 percent, and Rep. Vito Barbieri, R-Dalton Gardens, came in at 26th with 72.7 percent.

Foreman, with the University of Idaho in his backyard, ranked No. 2 on IFF's scorecard at 91.5 percent.

Stevenson, whose district includes Lewis-Clark State College, tied for sixth place with Rep. Priscilla Giddings, R-White Bird, for voting the IFF party line 96 percent of the time. Kingsley is not far behind at 13th place with a 90.7 percent rating.

Have they forgotten who they're working for?

CHEERS ... to Reps. Caroline Troy, R-Genesee, and Paul Shepherd, R-Riggins. For the sake of argument, let's assume scoring on either end of the Freedom Index spectrum indicates a tilt toward ideology.

So it's reassuring to see Troy voted the way IFF liked only 57.7 percent of the time, putting her roughly in the middle.

Same for Shepherd. His IFF score was 70.3 percent, putting him behind almost 30 other Republicans.

If nothing else, such modest scores suggest these lawmakers are thinking for themselves. - M.T.