

Idaho Falls Post Register, Friday, Feb. 27, 2009 – Cheers & jeers editorial by J. Robb Brady and Marty Trillhaase (3 pages)

Six months in Cottonwood

Post Register editorial board members are Roger Plothow, publisher; J. Robb Brady, publisher emeritus; and Marty Trillhaase, Opinions Page editor

-- JEERS to District Judge William Woodland. Former Custer County Sheriff Mickey Roskelley beats another man so severely -- and without provocation -- that his nose and jaw are broken. The victim, Frank Leaton, has \$37,000 in medical bills. And Woodland needs 180 days to think about it?

Roskelley was convicted of aggravated battery, a felony carrying up to 15 years. Rather than send Roskelley to prison -- or even a long stay in the Custer County jail -- Woodland placed the 53-year-old former sheriff on a 180-day rider at the North Idaho Correctional Institution at Cottonwood.

The judge wants the Cottonwood staff to evaluate Roskelley and then he'll decide whether to impose a longer prison term or put him on probation. That's a misuse of Cottonwood, a minimum-security prison where young offenders at the crossroads of life get schooling, counseling and treatment. Most get probation.

What are the odds that a former law enforcement official won't pass the Cottonwood program easily? Nor does Cottonwood have resources to spare. Its operating capacity is 399 inmates. As of Thursday, 410 people were locked up there.

-- CHEERS to former Idaho Gov. Phil Batt. Here's Idaho's Mr. Republican -- a former Idaho GOP chairman and the candidate who, in 1994, reclaimed the governor's office for his party for the first time in 24 years. Yet Batt crossed party lines recently when he commended Idaho's highest ranking Democrat -- Congressman Walt Minnick -- for voting against the Obama stimulus package.

"I don't yet know if I'll back Mr. Minnick for re-election," Batt wrote in a letter to the editor. "But I want him to know that I appreciate him standing up for Idaho."

-- CHEERS to state Sens. Chuck Coiner, R-Twin Falls, and Joe Stegner, R-Lewiston. Standing up for the rights of gays and lesbians is not a popular concern with many of the rank and file of the Idaho GOP. Taking up that cause can get a Republican tarnished with the RINO (Republican in Name Only) tag, plus attract a conservative opponent in the GOP primary. But Friday, Coiner and Stegner put their principles first. Coiner sponsored a bill to extend Idaho Human Rights Act protections against discrimination to gays and lesbians. Stegner voted to introduce the measure and schedule a public hearing. He was joined by Senate Democratic leader Kate Kelly of Boise. But the GOP-dominated committee refused to do even that much. They played it safe.

JEERS to House Transportation Committee Chairwoman JoAn Wood, R-Rigby. Wood is in a responsible position. She's a senior member of the House, having served 14 terms there. She directs transportation policy in this state.

So it's disconcerting to have her walk into the legislative budget committee and recommend a course of action that is illegal. On Feb. 19, Wood advocated taking the more than \$202 million the Obama stimulus package allocates to Idaho transportation and using it to pay off transportation bonds financing the "Connecting Idaho" program.

For one thing, it would have minimal effect. Idaho has borrowed about \$568 million for that program and is paying \$40 million a year in bond payments. Following Wood's advice would translate into about \$13 million a year in savings. But the kicker is this: Washington wants that money spent on shovel-ready projects that will create jobs. Congress passed that provision six days before Wood opened her mouth. Had she called someone, the Rigby Republican would have known that. So much for due diligence.

-- CHEERS to College of Idaho political scientist Jasper LiCalzi. Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter is getting praise for appointing Republicans and Democrats to a blue ribbon commission to help him navigate through Idaho's \$1 billion share of the Obama stimulus package. But LiCalzi is asking some pertinent questions:

"Why do we need this unelected commission to do the work that our elected officials are charged to do?"

Who decides? A student of the commission that closed military bases in the 1990s, LiCalzi says bureaucrats will exert more influence with a council of "wise men." Meanwhile, the elected officials will be let "off the hook" for the decisions that follow. Where are the special interests? Of the people Otter has named to this panel, more than half are registered lobbyists.

-- JEERS to the House Revenue and Taxation Committee. What is so sacred about Idaho's beer and wine taxes? The beer tax is right where it's been since John Kennedy took office in 1961. It's lost 86 percent of its purchasing power. The wine tax hasn't been updated since Richard Nixon announced his upcoming trip to China in 1971. It's lost 81 percent of its purchasing power. And yet a modest attempt to update those two taxes -- in order to generate \$14 million toward Idaho's substance abuse treatment programs -- generated a massive lobbying and public relations campaign. If you drink a six-pack of beer each week, you'd spend \$1 more a month. If you consume a bottle of wine a week, you'd spend \$1 more.

The politicians on the Rev and Tax Committee fell right in line. They voted the tax increase down on a 13-5 vote. Among those voting against the tax increase were Reps. Lenore Barrett, R-Challis, and Dell Raybould, R-Rexburg. Tax committee chairman Dennis Lake, R-Blackfoot, and Rep. JoAn Wood, R-Rigby, voted for the measure. Hey, if these products are so vital, why tax them at all?

-- CHEERS to former National Public Radio host Bob Edwards. Speaking in Twin Falls on Sunday, Edwards offered one of the best arguments yet against reimposing the federal Fairness Doctrine. Dropped in the mid 1980s, that doctrine requires broadcasters to offer equal time. Liberal critics of conservative talk radio, such as the Rush Limbaugh program, want it reinstated.

But Edwards -- whose former network is deemed left-of-center -- argues the Fairness Doctrine would have a chilling effect on free speech and on the coverage of news. For instance, he cites the example broadcast legend Edward R. Murrow encountered in the 1950s. Murrow challenged the agricultural policies of the federal government. The secretary of agriculture, Ezra Taft Benson, sought and got equal time. Then outraged Democrats asked for time to respond to Benson. Eventually, broadcasters learned to shy away from tough stories in order to avoid giving time away, Edwards said. So both conservatives and liberals were silenced.

-- CHEERS to the Idaho Conservation League and the Formation Capital Corporation mining company for an historic pact to protect clean water and enhance fish and wildlife in Lemhi County.

The pact has a broad reach among conservation groups, farmers and government agencies. It also includes a grant by the mining company of \$159,000 to provide an extraordinary diversity of habitat restoration projects.

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The projects include:

The Salmon Valley Stewardship organization is working with a local landowner to improve fish habitat in a mile of Hughes Creek which, with the cooperation of the Salmon-Challis National Forest, includes a 13,000-acre forest restoration project in that watershed.

The Nature Conservancy will be changing irrigation water delivery from Kenney Creek, an important tributary for protecting habitat for chinook salmon, steelhead, bull trout and cutthroat trout.

Trout Unlimited is working with the Amonson Ranch near Leadore to restore more than a mile of eroded stream bank on Little Springs Creek for habitat protection.

The Upper Salmon Basin Watershed will fill the role of preventing Chinook salmon and steelhead in the Lemhi River from getting trapped in an irrigation system, including fencing around a pivotal spring.

-- CHEERS to U.S. District Judge James Redden for not ruling out the possibility of eliminating the four Lower Snake River dams in Washington state to drastically improve salmon and steelhead recovery. Fish biologists have reported that removal of these dams is critical to the recovery effort.

Redden did not rule out keeping the four dams intact. But he expressed concerns "with the idea that the agencies could decide the dams are not jeopardizing the survival of these historical Northwest fish."

He also asked this question in a letter to all of the parties involved in the 2008 recovery plan of the Bush administration: "Is there no jeopardy if the numbers are below 100 fish like Snake River sockeye?" Only one sockeye returned to its Redfish Lake planting site two years ago. Idaho Fish and Game biologists, however, see a "larger than usual" return of both hatchery and wild salmon this year. Redden is setting the stage for a pivotal March 6 hearing in Portland, Ore.

J. Robb Brady and Marty Trillhaase