

Cast aside

Marty Trillhaase | Posted: Friday, September 27, 2013 12:00 am

JEERS ... to U.S. Reps. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R- Wash., and Raul Labrador and Mike Simpson, both R-Idaho. Last week, they joined all but 15 of their fellow Republicans in pulling nearly \$40 billion from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program - food stamps - during the next 10 years.

That's 10 times deeper than the U.S. Senate bill and almost double what House leadership failed to pass earlier this year - a version McMorris Rodgers and Simpson supported but Labrador opposed.

This latest measure means 18,000 low-income Idahoans and 124,000 Washington residents will be thrown to the curb, several steps closer toward hunger.

But it's only a 5 percent cut, you say.

OK. If these cuts were somehow part of a shared sacrifice toward balancing the budget, that would be one thing. But nothing is asked of people who don't worry about their next meal. Taking a page from the Mitt Romney 47 percent playbook, this merely indulges the fiction that the needy are getting a free ride and that deficit reduction can be carried solely on their backs.

SNAP families stretch their stipends through half the month - and even at that, it means relying on cheaper, less healthy diets - before turning to food banks and charities.

And let's not forget - Labrador and Simpson represent a poor state that got hammered by the Great Recession. It has the nation's highest proportion of minimum-wage jobs and is ranked 49th in per capita incomes.

In Idaho, 54 percent of the 226,000 SNAP recipients are working families and 78 percent of them have kids.

Of Washington's 1.1 million people getting help, 42 percent are working and two-thirds of them have children in the home.

Are McMorris Rodgers, Labrador and Simpson so divorced from harsh realities at home that people struggling to avoid hunger no longer have faces, names or value?

JEERS ... to Tim Eyman. If you take Washington's initiative king's latest ruse seriously, the joke's on you.

Now headed to a mailbox near you is the 2013 Washington ballot. On it, you will find five advisory votes, seeking your opinion of the recent Legislature's tax decisions.

Credit Wyman's Initiative 970 - which required any tax increase to win a two-thirds majority in the House and Senate until the Supreme Court struck it down as unconstitutional. Left behind is this ballot remnant, which conveys:

Deception No. 1 - The Legislature aggressively raised taxes. Not necessarily. After a marathon standoff between the Democratic House and the GOP-dominated Senate, lawmakers avoided sending the state off the budgetary cliff by compromising. They raised about \$146 million on a budget of \$30 billion, largely by maintaining the taxing structure already in place.

The single largest component - \$109.7 million - involved taxes on real estate transfers. But scattered elsewhere are measures as miniscule as a \$35,000 excise tax on commuter airlines and a \$145,000 excise tax on people who lease publicly owned property.

Deception No. 2 - Lawmakers were somehow sneaky because they acted "without a vote of the people." That's not how representative democracy works. There is no requirement for direct voter approval of any tax bill.

Besides, four of the five bills cleared the House and the Senate unanimously. Only the real estate measure drew fire, but the House passed it 53-33 and the Senate approved 30-19.

Deception No. 3 - This is no referendum. Whatever the outcome of the vote, the laws stand. This cynical exercise wastes a your tax money - Secretary of State Kim Wyman's office spent \$140,000 preparing information in the voters guide - and your time.

CHEERS ... to the 19-member Idaho health exchange board. Organized five months ago, it was asked to do the impossible - have a state-based health insurance exchange ready to operate by Oct. 1.

Other states had been preparing their exchanges for two years. But Idaho's Republican opposition to this feature of Obamacare relented only this spring.

Even at that, Idaho is the only state run by a GOP governor and Republican Legislature that has opted to build its own exchange. Other red states have obstinately thrown that job back at the federal government, putting their consumers, health care providers and businesses at some risk of higher costs and more disruptions.

Exchange board members, including state Rep. John Rusche, D-Lewiston, moved quickly. They hired an executive director, Amy Dowd. They obtained a bridge loan through the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare until federal grant dollars arrived. And most importantly, they relied on Health and Human Services exchange software for the first year while Idaho develops the system it will use thereafter.

"We're baking a multimillion-dollar business from scratch," Rusche told the Idaho Statesman's Darin Oswald. "You just don't add water and expect it to be completed."

More than 190,000 Idahoans are eligible to obtain health insurance through the exchange.

CHEERS ... to AAA of Idaho. It has a message for Idaho motorists: You can't get something for nothing. It's been nearly two decades since then-Idaho Gov. Phil Batt persuaded lawmakers to raise fuel taxes and registration fees.

Since then, inflation and fuel-efficient cars have eroded Idaho's ability to maintain transportation. Every year, the state falls about \$262 million short.

Five years ago, Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter failed to win over members of his own Republican Party to support Idaho's network of highways and bridges. But Senate Transportation Committee Chairman Bert Brackett, R-Rogerson, has signaled his intent to push highway revenue measures in 2014.

Dave Carlson, AAA's director of public and government affairs, has launched a grass-roots campaign. AAA also wants ordinary motorists represented at the table. A revenue package fair to all is one in which everybody pays his share. Too often, Idaho's politically connected special interests have prevailed, which leaves people driving passenger cars and trucks paying higher rates and subsidizing the trucking industry.

Learn more at www.BetterRoadsforIdaho.com. - M.T.