

Political Notebook

By Daniel Person, Chronicle Staff Writer
The Bozeman Daily Chronicle

On smoking pot and fishing

Gallatin County lawmakers voted with their parties this past week on a bill to repeal Montana's medical marijuana law.

Republican Reps. Tom Burnett, Gordy Vance, Kelly Flynn, Ted Washburn and Michael More voted in favor of repealing the act.

Democratic Reps. Franke Wilmer, Kathleen Williams and Mike Phillips voted against the repeal.

Park County's two Republican House members, Reps. Dan Skattum and John Esp also voted for the repeal.

Madison County Rep. Bob Wagner, R-Harrison, was one of six Republicans to join Democrats in voting against repeal.

Repealing the law would in effect outlaw using marijuana for medical purposes. Also this past week, on a bill that would cut waterways defined as irrigation ditches out of Montana's stream-access law - making them off limits to anglers - most Gallatin County lawmakers voted "no."

Burnett, Wilmer, Williams, Phillips, Washburn and More all voted against the measure that some fear would whittle away at Montana's famous stream-access laws.

Vance and Flynn voted for the bill, which supporters say protects private property by ensuring manmade canals created to water fields aren't used by fishermen. Skattum and Esp voted for the bill. Wagner voted against the bill on second reading in the House, but voted in favor of it during third reading.

Patriot Act axed

In Congress last week, Rep. Denny Rehberg voted against extending provisions of the Patriot Act, helping what some are calling a Tea Party revolt in the U.S. House.

The vote was a procedural one to allow Congress to fast track the one-year extension. But it fell eight votes short of what it needed.

Some have questioned whether Tea Party Republicans deserve credit, since a vast majority of those voting against the extension were Democrats.

Then again, last year, when Democrats held a large majority in the House, a Patriot Act extension easily passed.

And, as the Cato Institute noted, the House still voted in favor of extending the act - just not in the numbers needed to fast track the bill. So, by Cato's thinking, the extension will probably happen, it just won't be easy.

The third rail

Sen. Jon Tester lashed out at President Barack Obama's high-speed rail plan this week, saying the money to pay for the rail upgrade would come from heating assistance.

"Talk about misplaced, off-track priorities," he said in a statement. "I won't support a budget that dumps billions of dollars into high-speed rail while cutting something as basic as heat for family homes across Montana and America."

Obama has made high-speed rail a priority, saying it would help America's economy by beefing up transportation corridors in heavily populated areas.
Tell me where did you sleep last night?

It's been a point of pride for Rehberg that he has never taken a residence in Washington, D.C. and instead sleeps in his office and flies home every weekend to Billings.

And he's not alone.

At least 33 other Congressmen from both parties sleep in their offices. But an ethics group in Washington, D.C., is now crying foul over, saying the lawmakers are essentially using taxpayer property for personal use - a violation of U.S. House rules.

"House office buildings are not dorms or frat houses," said the executive director of Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, Melanie Sloan. "If members didn't want to find housing in Washington, they shouldn't have run for Congress in the first place."

Sleeping in offices became stylish after the Republican takeover in 1994. Lawmakers wanted to send a message that they didn't intend on becoming permanent residents of D.C.

"It's the ultimate I'm-not-a-professional-politician statement," the Wall Street Journal said in a recent article, noting that 15 percent of the 2011 freshman class planned on sleeping in their offices.

And Congressmen seemed unfazed by this latest complaint.

"Denny lives in Billings, with his family on his ranch. When he's in Washington, he's there to work for Montana and that's what he'll continue to do," said Jed Link, a Rehberg spokesman.

"People have been doing it for decades," Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., told the

Associated Press. "I work until midnight every night. I get up at six every morning."
Daniel Person can be reached at dperson@dailychronicle.com or 582-2665.