

## A surprise development

Commissioner moves into office left by departed building, planning chief

BY JAMES HAGENRUBER  
Staff writer

Kootenai County Commission Chairman Gus Johnson moved into the vacant office of the county's building and planning department director Wednesday. County officials have been trying to fill the position for two months, since longtime director Rand Wichman quit to start a private consulting business.

Johnson's sudden presence in the office raised red flags among some professional planning staff, as well as outside observers, but Johnson insists he's there merely to gain a better understanding of the position so county officials can make a wise decision on the eventual hire.

"I'm not the interim director," he said. "I'm just down there to help staff through the process. Without having a real director



Johnson

down there, they need some direction on some things. ... I'm just kind of observing right now. I'm going on trips with building inspectors, watching what happens at the front desk."

Will Johnson be making any decisions in the department's day-to-day operations?

"No! No! No!" said Commissioner Katie Brodie. "He's there to see how they operate, what the processes are, if we're

being as efficient as possible."

The county's three commissioners decided Tuesday afternoon it would be a good idea for Johnson to move into the office, Johnson said. He said he will be there "as long as it takes." This could mean through January, when he leaves office. Johnson said he was "not at this time" considering applying for the position.

Johnson and Brodie were voted out of office in the May primary election. Growth was a top issue in the race, with challengers and voters expressing anger over the county's handling of

### At a glance

County Commission Chairman Gus Johnson says he will be in the vacant office of the county's building and planning department director "as long as it takes." This could mean through January, when he leaves office.

the recent super-heated expansion, which has clogged roads with traffic and is quickly consuming remaining open spaces.

Johnson said he wants to be a part of the office so he better

## Tax reform impact debated

Experts paint varying pictures

BY BETSY Z. RUSSELL  
Staff writer

BOISE — Two leading voices in Idaho's property tax debate are drawing seemingly opposite conclusions about the impact on businesses of this year's increase in the homeowner's exemption, but experts say both are using correct numbers.

Steve Ahrens, head of the Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry, contends that businesses were hit with a \$47 million property tax increase because lawmakers upped the homeowner's exemption to \$75,000, an increase of \$25,000.

Ken Robison, author of the homeowner's exemption and a former Democratic legislator, calls that "IACI's big lie." Because homes continue to grow faster in value than business properties, Robison said, any "tax shift" triggered by the increase in the homeowner's exemption has actually gone the other way — onto homes.

"I don't think either of them are wrong on the numbers," said Alan Dornfest, property tax policy supervisor for the state Tax Commission. "It's perspective. It's where you draw the line."

It matters because the Legislature is poised to meet in a special session Friday to enact a tax reform plan that would cut property taxes but raise the sales tax.

Business property owners stand to gain the most, in part because homeowners already get a break from the homeowner's exemption increase.

Ahrens wrote recently, "Before the session even starts, Idaho businesses already face a \$47 million property tax increase this year, \$47 million!" He maintains that unless the reform plan is enacted, "Idaho businesses will be slammed with one of the largest tax increases ever imposed by the Legislature on the business community."

That's based on the idea that when one group of property owners gets an exemption from taxes, everyone else must pay a little more to make up the difference. That's generally how Idaho's tax system works. But Robison points out that how much each group pays also depends on how its property value compares with other groups.

Residential property owners have been paying more and more of Idaho's property taxes over the past decade and a half. According to Tax Commission records, owners of residential property paid 63 percent of Idaho's property tax in 2005, compared with 47.1 percent in 1990.

"From 2003 to 2005, total

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## Advocate for whites runs for NIC post

Hess wants more European studies

BY MEGHANN M. CUNIFF  
Staff writer

A man who hopes to fight what he said is a pattern in the U.S. of discrimination against people of European descent will challenge the current North Idaho College Board of Trustees vice chairman for a seat on the board in November.

Stan Hess, 61, filed his declaration of candidacy Wednesday morning, making himself and vice chairman Denny Hague the only candidates who have filed for the seat thus far. The filing deadline is Aug. 31.

"It's all about the European American human rights movement," Hess said in an interview at his home in Hayden.

If elected to the board, he plans to push for the implementation of a European American studies program at the college and for the declaration of the month of October as "European American Heritage Month," he said. He'd also like to get rid of the intercollegiate athletics program and replace it with an intramural one to save money, and to change policies so that the college president is elected by the people rather than appointed by the board and have trustees serve just two-year terms instead of the current six-year terms.

On the Web site of the European American Unity and Rights Organization — widely regarded by civil rights groups as a white supremacist association — Hess is listed as the Idaho contact, but he said he severed ties with the group about a year ago. Started by Ku Klux Klansman David Duke, Hess said the group's ties to the KKK concerned him and that he found it difficult to work within a large organization. He served as president of the organization's California chapter prior to moving to North Idaho in 2003.

He said he has started his own group here — the European-American Human Rights Task Force. Still in its organizational stage, Hess said the group has members, but they want to keep their membership secret because they still work in the community.

The Southern Poverty Law Center, a civil rights group that tracks white supremacist organizations and their members, considers Hess to be one of the 100 most prolific white supremacists in the country.

"He's a big man in hate; there's no question," said Heidi Berich, the center's spokeswoman. "People should know that."

Hess said he doesn't con-

See STAN HESS, B2



JESSE TINSLEY The Spokesman-Review

### Woolly bully

Colten Melton, 6, of Post Falls, pushes himself up after falling off a bucking ewe that was less than 2 seconds out of the chute at the North Idaho Fair on Wednesday. Melton was taking part in "mutton busting," where contestants younger than 7 and less than 60 pounds try to ride a sheep. For a \$12 entry fee, kids vie for a silver belt buckle in the event. The fair schedule and details are at [www.northidahofair.com](http://www.northidahofair.com).

## Ellington murder trial opens

Hayden man charged in New Year's Day death

BY SAM TAYLOR  
Staff writer

Kootenai County prosecutors Wednesday painted a picture of a Hayden man who had been drinking early in the morning before allegedly killing an Adol woman by running over her with his Chevrolet Blazer on New Year's Day.

Defense lawyers for Jonathan Wade Ellington made more than 60 objections on the first day of the trial as they claimed the death of 31-year-old Vonette Larsen was accidental.

Ellington is charged with second-degree murder and two counts of aggravated battery stemming from the Jan. 1 death of Larsen, which occurred after what defense attorneys



JESSE TINSLEY The Spokesman-Review  
Jonathan Ellington, center, walks to the Kootenai County Courthouse with his defense team Wednesday in Coeur d'Alene.

called a "cat-and-mouse" game between Ellington and Larsen's daughters, Jovon and Jolene.

The sisters called their parents to the scene

of an alleged altercation Jan. 1, which turned into a high-speed pursuit ending in the ramming of their Honda Accord, their father firing shots at the Blazer and Vonette Larsen being run over.

Public Defender Brad Chapman lost a motion to have a mistrial declared, but he persuaded the judge to get "gruesome" photos of the victim from being admitted into evidence.

"Quite frankly, judge, they're disrespectful. ... This is sensationalism," Chapman said of the photos, which depict Larsen uncovered on the ground and close-ups of her head wound, which investigators say is how she died.

Deputy Prosecutor Art Verharen argued that the photos of Larsen, taken after a yellow tarp had been removed from her body, were necessary to show what took place.

"Beyond the fact that this is a murder trial,"

See TRIAL, B3

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## The FBI exercises its right to buy goods cheaply



D.F. OLIVERIA

There was considerable testimony in the 1st District Court on Tuesday about a botched FBI tape recording involving murder suspect Joseph Edward Duncan III. Let's rewind the tape to last summer when the FBI first questioned Duncan about his possible connection with the killings of Brenda Greene, her two sons, and lover Mark McKenzie. Seems FBI agents borrowed a tape recorder from Kootenai County sheriff's detectives to conduct an initial interview. But the recorder wasn't

available later when Duncan requested the FBI to return for a follow-up chat. So, an agent got permission from a supervisor to buy a digital recorder from the local Fred Meyer. Unfortunately, he didn't have time to read the lengthy manual that came with it before interrogating Duncan again. He winged it. The tape ran out. And that's how the FBI lost about an hour's worth of its interview with Duncan, including a brief discussion about the Greenes. That disclosure caused a courtroom wag to quip: "I wonder where the

FBI buys its guns?" Wal-Mart? • That's great deal that the Human Rights Education Institute got on folding chairs wasn't so great, after all. Two collapsed "like tinfoil" during U.S. Sen. Larry Craig's wild town hall meeting at the institute Tuesday — one with Repub die-hard Ruthie Johnson on board, the other being Jim Accutt of the Kootenai County and Waterways Advisory Board. Neither Seasoned Citizen was hurt. Let's hope institute Director K.J. Tongerson kept her big-box-store receipt.

### Tax burdens

Estimated growth in property taxes for two groups, according to the state Tax Commission. The figures would shrink upon enactment of a tax reform plan being considered by the Legislature on Friday. **Residential:** Would grow by \$7.1 million from 2005 levels, or 9 percent, for 2006. **Nonresidential:** Would grow by \$33.5 million, or 7 percent.