

Olympia's sunshine is Boise's darkness

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West of the Idaho-Washington border, state officials and legislators are legally bound to disclose how and where they draw their incomes.

Idaho - not so much.

Washington requires its officials to file a yearly report.

Idaho - nope.

In the Evergreen State, the law says state officials must outline where they work or if they serve on a company's board of directors. This information is detailed. Same goes for the Washington official's spouse.

Idaho - nada.

Also expected of Washington state officials is some information about how much money they earn, how much they have invested and what kind of real estate holdings they own.

Idaho - nothing.

Washington also puts this information online.

Idaho - you can't put online what you don't have.

Finally, Washington enforces its disclosure laws and penalizes violators.

Idaho - How can it enforce a law that's not on the books?

All of which explains why the Center for Public Integrity says Washingtonians live under the second-best public disclosure laws in the country.

And it's why Idaho - with absolutely no disclosure required of its elected officials - has the worst.

None of this means states with more transparency laws are virtuous while states without them are inherently dirty. Whatever its flaws, Idaho's state government has little stomach for graft. If Louisiana, which topped the center's list for strict disclosure laws, didn't write the book on corruption, it certainly contributed a few chapters.

Disclosure is about empowering the voters. No one expects a part-time, citizen legislator to give up his livelihood simply to spend a few months in Olympia or Boise. But in Washington, a voter can discern whether his lawmaker is serving the public's interest - or simply his own.

In Idaho, voters just have to take a legislator's word for it.

That attitude is far outside the political mainstream. While the center handed out Fs to 20 states, only three - Vermont, Michigan and Idaho - allow state officials and legislators to operate under cover. In fact, within the last two years, 14 states have improved their disclosure laws.

Idaho came close to joining the list.

To win passage, Senate Republican leader Bart Davis of Idaho Falls and Democratic leader Kate Kelly of Boise worked toward winning approval for a modest bill. It would have required officials and spouses to divulge where they work, but not what they make. Only minimal information on investments was sought. For instance, an official had to report owning real estate in a specific county, but not the parcel's size or location.

Nor did the bill mandate disclosure of debts and liabilities.

But it was a positive step. Gov. Butch Otter supported it. So did Secretary of State Ben Ysursa. The Idaho Senate unanimously approved the measure.

Then it went to the House, where Speaker Lawrence Denney, R-Midvale, pocketed it.

End of story?

Not yet. Kelly says she's prepared to make another run at passing public disclosure in 2010. Denney says he'll be more receptive. Until then, keep asking the speaker: If he has nothing to hide, why is he hiding something? - M.T.