

Too costly not to pursue

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We asked because it is important that the public knows.

So we'll ask again.

What is most puzzling is why the state believes that every citizen's right to open government and accountability can be negotiated away simply because it is expedient.

Elected officials would not condone a similar arrangement with a Micron, Potlatch, Simplot or Idaho Power. It will be interesting to see what happens in this case.

But let's back up.

Several weeks ago this newspaper reported that the Coeur d'Alene Tribe had not made contributions to local schools from casino profits since 2009. State law requires tribes contribute 5 percent of annual net gaming income for the support of local educational program and schools on or near the reservation.

The tribe said it made the payments - but refused to disclose who received money.

So we asked the people at the State Lottery, who are charged with ensuring the tribe comply with the law. They also refused to disclose the information, citing the gaming compact the state made with the tribe that stipulates the information be kept secret.

That's when we filed a formal request for public records. After a week's delay, the state informed us once again they would not release the information.

We have heard that some tribal leaders are miffed at us for pursuing the information. They believe we have a vendetta against the tribe.

But this is not about the tribe.

This is about the state of Idaho and accountability.

State law requires the payments are made to schools every year by every tribe in the state that operates a casino. We don't know whether other Idaho tribes made the payments, but we do know that no local school districts received any money from the Coeur d'Alene Tribe since 2009.

Until last month, that is.

It is possible the tribe made payments to other districts and just didn't tell anyone. But if

so, does that bring them into compliance with the stipulation for such payments to go to local educational programs and schools on or near the reservation?

And if they had fulfilled their obligation, why did the tribe rush a \$210,000 check over the Plummer/Worley school district after the story broke?

Those are fair questions that may have good answers. Except the state isn't talking.

Instead the state claims that the agreement gives them the right to keep the information secret.

We don't think so.

We don't think elected officials can ignore state law simply because an influential, well-heeled business prefers it that way.

Our next step is to file a petition with the court in Ada County to compel the state to release the information. It seems absurd that we have to take that expensive step to ensure the state lottery complies with the law. But to allow bureaucrats to negotiate away the basic expectation of open government would be even more costly. - Dan Hammes