

In Idaho, any grade above an F-plus is passing

Marty Trillhaase |

On the same day state Sen. Monty Pearce, R-New Plymouth, defended himself against charges of lining his pockets in office, the state got a near-failing score on a national measure of corruption.

Think there's a connection?

Pearce, a 14-year legislative veteran, is at the vortex of efforts to open Idaho to oil and natural gas development. As chairman of the Senate Resources and Conservation Committee, Pearce oversaw Senate passage of bills that updated the state's oil and gas regulatory framework - without which the fledgling industry in Pearce's backyard would be stalled.

The panel also refused to impose more stringent controls on fracking and endorsed stripping counties and cities of their ability to stop or influence oil and gas development in their jurisdictions.

All that time, Pearce was sitting on a secret: On Nov. 4, he signed a lease with Snake River Oil and Gas, making him a partner with one of the big players behind the legislation. Senate rules say a member must disclose a conflict of interest before acting or voting.

Pearce waited.

He waited until those bills cleared his panel.

He waited until the controversial local government provision survived a 17-17 tie vote in the Senate.

He waited until the final package was assured of passage. Only then did he acknowledge his conflict of interest. When Democrats and citizens cried foul, Pearce became a model of self-righteous indignation. A Senate ethics panel will decide.

But it's only the flavor of the month at the state Capitol. So far this year, you've seen:

- GOP Senate Caucus Chairman John McGee of Caldwell - already notorious for a drunken driving bust and inflating his expense voucher - resign amid allegations that he sexually harassed a female Senate staffer.

- Sen. Jeff Siddoway, R-Terretton, exploiting the cracks in Idaho's ethics laws by declaring a conflict of interest before pursuing bills aimed at helping his sheep and elk ranching businesses.
- House Transportation Committee Chairman Joe Palmer, R-Meridian, trying to shut down Capitol Mall parking meters until it was disclosed his son, Ty Palmer, was a frequent offender who owed \$186 in unpaid tickets last year and had his car towed from the Capitol Mall on Jan. 9.
- State Treasurer Ron Crane who avoided prosecution after legislative auditors found tax dollars were paying for his daily commute from Nampa to Boise and that the state treasurer had spent lavishly on credit rating trips to New York City.
- The ethically challenged House Speaker Lawrence Denney, R-Midvale, and Idaho Republican Party Chairman Norm Semanko, plotting to sabotage Idaho's redistricting commission because they didn't like the results.

And that says nothing of tax scofflaw Rep. Phil Hart, R-Athol, or former State Tax Commission Chairman Royce Chigbrow, whose sweetheart dealing with corporate taxpayers nearly got him prosecuted.

Now comes a report that says Idaho is at the threshold of crossing from one-party cronyism into corruption. The Center for Public Integrity, Global Integrity and Public Radio International gave Idaho a D-minus.

Only eight states failed entirely. As they say in the councils of government in Boise, that's better than an F-plus.

Idaho stands among a handful of states where the politicians police themselves. There is no independent ethics commission. The personal financial secrets Pearce and other elected officials keep remain inviolate. Idaho doesn't protect its whistleblowers. But it allows any retiring state politician or administrator to find himself a lucrative lobbying perch.

Under the circumstances, Idaho would have flunked except for points won by:

- Voters, who in 1974 passed the campaign finance disclosure laws through the Sunshine Initiative.
- The courts, which in the 1980s decreed government records were public documents.
- Earlier legislators, who created the independent redistricting commission, a transparent budget-writing process and an auditing branch to keep government honest.

Think how different this story would have been had Denney and Senate President Pro Tem Brent Hill, R-Rexburg, kept their earlier pledge to create an ethics commission, slow the revolving door through which state officials pass to snatch lobbying jobs, protect whistleblowers and require elected officials to disclose their private financial holdings.

Instead, they filibustered the ideas to death, leaving Idaho mired in a quickening cyclone of public scandals. If our elected officials can't pass the ethics test, remedial lessons had better come at the ballot box.- M.T.