

Little's no comment only fans the flames

Marty Trilhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Until this month, Mark Little was Idaho's top purchasing official.

Poke around and you might hear gossip that he was disgruntled with the way his superiors managed school Superintendent Tom Luna's massive student laptop computer program.

Described as a 57-year-old by-the-book former military man, he's taken a job with the Port of Tacoma. Little could have easily dismissed the rumors by noting he's getting paid \$100,000 - considerably more than the \$71,282 he earned in Idaho - or that he was moving to be closer to his children and grandchildren.

The Idaho Statesman's Dan Popkey gave him every opportunity.

He didn't take it.

"I don't know about that, but I don't want to talk to you," he said. "I'm not going to answer your questions. I got nothin' to say to you, OK?"

Until voters stopped it cold Nov. 6 by a two-thirds vote, LunaTech proposed to spend millions equipping every high school student with a laptop computer.

By then, the red flags had unfurled.

Competitive bidding broke down. Three outfits - names withheld - responded to the state's requests for proposals. One missed the deadline. Another failed to meet the contract requirements. All of which suggested the state was either ahead of the product evolution or its bid specifications tilted toward one provider.

The Department of Administration began sole-source negotiations, forfeiting control over pricing.

Luna's sister, Teresa Luna, headed up Administration. LunaTech was the top political priority not only of her brother, but of her boss, Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter, and the GOP Legislature - and it was facing a referendum vote.

What emerged was an eight-year contract with Hewlett-Packard to deliver the laptops. Every time the Spokesman-Review's Betsy Russell pored over it, she uncovered more warts:

- At \$182 million, it cost 25 percent more than Tom Luna promised.
- To lease - not buy - laptops from HP, Idaho would spend \$1,171 per unit. Here's betting you could buy one tomorrow at half the price.
- Every time a student lost or damaged a laptop, the state would pay HP.

- The \$14 million "buyout" clause applied even if Idaho stuck to the contract for the full eight years, bringing the HP contract cost to \$190 million.

Now comes Little's unwillingness to put a positive spin on his departure or steer Popkey clear of the story - amid a backdrop of questionable deal-making on Otter's watch.

Former state Transportation Director Pam Lowe took a \$750,000 settlement after getting the boot - she alleged - for crossing some of Otter's political cronies.

Former State Tax Commission Chairman - and Otter campaign treasurer - Royce Chigbrow resigned amid accusations he was cutting sweetheart tax deals with corporations.

Former Administration Director - and Otter alter ego - Mike Gwartney was accused of playing favorites with the Idaho Education Network contract.

And Otter's former chief of staff, Jason Kreizenbeck, was negotiating himself a job lobbying for Corrections Corporation of America when its contract to manage the violence-prone Idaho Correctional Center was under scrutiny.

A smoking gun?

No.

But there's enough smoke here to choke on. - M.T.