One for the books

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

JEERS ... to Amy Dowd. The director of Your Health Idaho, the state-based health insurance exchange, Dowd delivered a no-bid, $375,000 technology oversight contract to a member of her board, Frank Chan, shortly after he stepped down.

Even by Idaho's evolving standards of sweetheart deal-making, this is one for the books.

Dowd agreed to pay Chan twice his normal $95 hourly rate. And nobody Dowd consulted - from exchange Chairman Stephen Weeg, the exchange's lawyers at Hawley Troxell in Boise and Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's administration - stopped her.

The state is under the gun to get its own exchange software up and running. Once the deal got exposed, Chan withdrew the contract. The board called for a review and trimmed Dowd's authority to act unilaterally.

But why does it take a train wreck before so many smart, experienced, savvy people catch on?

Could it be that after watching state tax commission Chairman Royce Chigbrow dispense favors, state school Superintendent Tom Luna steer millions to his corporate cronies, former House Speaker (Boss) Lawerence Denney ignore tax scofflaw Rep. Phil Hart's antics or former Administration Department chief - and Otter alter-ego - Mike Gwartney manipulate the Idaho Education Network contracts, Idaho's leadership is ethically unhinged?

JEERS ... to Idaho Department of Correction Director Brent Reinke. On his watch, the state enabled Corrections Corporation of America's chronic understaffing of the Idaho Correctional Center outside Boise, transforming that prison into a violence-ridden "gladiator school."

Five years before CCA's history of scrimping on staffing - thereby enabling inmates to beat up each other - culminated in U.S. District Judge David O. Carter holding the contractor in contempt of court, an internal IDOC memo said ICC inmate violence "has steadily increased to the point that there are four incidents for every one that occurs in the rest of the Idaho state-operated facilities combined."

Although Reinke ramped up monitoring of the state's $29 million contract with CCA, his oversight lacked conviction. As the Associated Press' Rebecca Boone unveiled this week, Reinke's department knew CCA was violating its contractual obligation to adequately staff the prison for at least three years.

Even when a flurry of prisoner lawsuits showcased persistent understaffing, the department didn't scrutinize CCA's staffing reports.

Idaho officials knew enough to impose financial penalties for contract violations - the only thing the profits-driven CCA understands - but they never did. Instead, they put on the kid gloves and even allowed CCA to get by with fewer guards.

And then it's shocked - shocked! - to find out CCA filed falsified time cards and billed Idaho for shifts that weren't worked.

"Never in a million years did we think they were lying to us," IDOC quality assurance manger Natalie Warner told Boone.

How would Warner handle an empty cookie jar and a preschooler with crumbs on his face?

"In this case, it was a $29 million cookie jar," says Alex Friedmann, managing editor of Prison Legal News. "And when CCA is found with cookie crumbs all over their face but denies wrongdoing, the Idaho Department of Correction says, 'OK,' without fact-checking."

JEERS ... to Latah County Sheriff Wayne Rausch. He's clamming up about an Oct. 18 one-car rollover outside Potlatch.

Rausch won't identify three minors - two 15-year-old girls and a 15-year-old boy -who were with driver Gerrie A. Dickinson.

This is not idle gossip. People want to know if children in their community are hurt. Hence, most police routinely disclose this information.

So did Rausch's office - until now.

Initially, the Latah County sheriff said it was his prerogative to protect the privacy of juveniles. When the Lewiston Tribune slapped him with a formal public records request, Rausch switched his story and said the law allowed him to shield such details because the accident investigation was active.

Come on. This particular code section was meant to protect judicial proceedings such as criminal trials, not routine traffic accident reports. Nor does any law require Rausch to conceal anything. It's his choice.

OK, sheriff. What are you hiding?

CHEERS ... to five Lewiston City Council candidates who Tuesday pledged to pursue equal justice under the law.

Because Idaho lawmakers won't act, seven Idaho cities have extended civil rights protection to people on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. So far, Lewiston has not.

But at the League of Women Voters forum, three candidates - incumbent Dennis Ohrtman, Lewis-Clark State College head track coach Mike Collins and LCSC student Jesse Maldonado - gave unqualified support to the ending discrimination.

Mayor Kevin Poole and Walter Phillips want a city human rights commission to lay the groundwork for an ordinance. It's plodding along, but other Idaho cities have followed the same grass-roots path toward changing the law.

At least give them points for being aware, which is more than you can say for council candidates Bob Blakey, Gordon Gregg and R.J. Johnston.

JEERS ... to state school Superintendent Tom Luna. If he's so committed to his plan to boost school funding 5.9 percent, where was he last week?

Luna sent his assistant, Jason Hancock, to outline the blueprint to the State Board of Education when it met at Lewis-Clark State College.

It's been more than 40 years since a state school superintendent blew off his yearly budget presentation to the State Board.

While State Board members openly groused about how K-12 funding would leave higher education to grovel for scraps, Luna was sucking down hors d'oeuvres with former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush at the Sheraton Boston Hotel, scene of the sixth annual National Summit of the Foundation for Excellence in Education. - M.T.