

Boss Denney's story gets even more incredible

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

The TV show "That's Incredible" hasn't been on the air for decades, but it would make a good working title for any story about Lawrence (Boss) Denney.

After all, here's a former House speaker who now wants a promotion to Idaho secretary of state. Each chapter in Denney's sordid tale of cronyism and self-dealing prompts yet another catcall of - wait for it - "That's Incredible."

That catcall goes double for Cynthia Sewell's account of Denney's latest round of ethical lapses in Sunday's Idaho Statesman. Did we really need another reminder about why electing Denney secretary of state makes about as much sense as putting stock swindler Bernie Madoff in charge of the Securities and Exchange Commission?

First under Pete T. Cenarrusa and then Ben Ysursa, the secretary of state's office has set the gold standard for the impartial administration of elections. Cenarrusa and Ysursa, both Republicans, were unwavering advocates for the franchise of all voters. And they were scrupulous in their dedication that everyone - Republican or Democrat, influential or not - played by the rules and disclosed where they got their money and how they spent it.

Before his own Republican Party took the unprecedented step of dumping him as speaker last year, Denney, R-Midvale, set a standard of another kind. If you were a crony, you could do no wrong - even if, like former state Rep. Phil Hart, R-Hayden, you had an aversion to paying income taxes but had no compunction about serving on the House Revenue and Taxation Committee.

Stand in Denney's way and you could lose a committee chairmanship, get challenged in a GOP primary or even get pressured to leave the supposedly independent panel responsible for drawing legislative and congressional district boundaries.

Here's what Sewell uncovered: During his legislative run, Denney's wife, Donna, took a job at the Commission on Aging. Donna Denney apparently used her state computer to work for My State USA. In the midst of an investigation - which concluded Donna Denney was guilty of a firing offense but nothing criminal - her supervisor, Kim Toryanski quit. Toryanski is the wife of former Sen. Mitch Toryanski, R-Boise, who is also running for secretary of state.

Bret Kessinger, an Idaho State Police detective investigating Mrs. Denney, reported Kim Toryanski "advised me that the political pressures, particularly from Speaker Denney and his political allies, had been a primary reason" for quitting.

Nothing new there. This is the same Boss Denney who extorted a developer looking for a tax break to fire its lobbyist - former state Rep. Jerry Deckard, R-Eagle, a foe - and replace him with former Rep. Julie Ellsworth, R-Boise, a friend.

My State USA went on to secure a contract with the Idaho Military Division worth about \$340,000. The company had paid Donna Denney about \$15,200 and issued stock in the company worth anywhere from \$380 to \$112,900.

If the stock was valued at \$5,000 or more, Speaker Denney was legally obligated to disclose his conflict of interest. Even if the stock value was in dispute, he could have erred on the side of openness.

Transparency is not in Boss Denney's vocabulary.

When the state Senate passed a modest bill requiring lawmakers to disclose their sources of income, then-Speaker Denney single-handedly used the powers of his office to kill it.

Likewise, when former state Rep. Dennis Lake, R-Blackfoot, ran a bill to stop part-time lawmakers from spiking their state pensions by taking full-time state jobs, Denney used the speaker's office to block it. If elected to succeed Ysursa, Denney will expand his legislative pension of about \$500 to about \$3,600 a month, just by holding on to the secretary of state's \$99,450 salary for 42 months.

And what does this candidate for public office say?

What is the response of the man who would be the guardian of government transparency?

Nothing.

Like so many Idaho Republicans who get into trouble, he's turned to former Attorney General David Leroy to explain things.

Incredible.

Here's a simple notion: If Denney insists on using Leroy as a mouthpiece, how about running Leroy in his place? - M.T.