

Things are getting stinky down in Boise

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Not long ago, the State Integrity Investigation rated Idaho's ethics in government safeguards the 41st weakest among the 50 states, with an overall grade just short of failing.

But Idahoans could shrug it off.

"There's no deep history of corruption here, no dingy statehouse corridors or smoke-filled rooms," the Spokesman-Review's Betsy Russell wrote in a companion piece to the study.

No longer. That odor you smell is coming from Boise:

- Former House Speaker Lawrence (Boss) Denney, R-Midvale, told a company seeking a tax break to replace its lobbyist with one of his political cronies.
- Legislative auditors caught state Treasurer Ron Crane filling up his gas tank at state expense.
- Before she accepted a \$750,000 settlement, former Idaho Transportation Director Pamela Lowe had alleged that crossing swords with politically wired contractors got her fired.
- Former State Tax Commission Chairman Royce Chigbrow got the boot after it was disclosed he had been looking out for his pals, betraying taxpayer secrets and mishandling tax payments.
- Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's close friend and former Department of Administration Director Mike Gwartney interfered with a state bidding process, handing the massive Idaho Education Network project to Qwest (now CenturyLink) and Education Networks of America while cutting out Syringa Network LLC. Last week, a District Court judge voided that contract, leaving Idaho taxpayers on the hook for millions.
- The FBI and U.S. Attorney Wendy Olson have been investigating how Corrections Corporation of America defrauded the state under its contract to manage the Idaho Correctional Center outside Boise. Idaho settled for \$1 million, probably less than it was owed, and an Otter appointee canceled a state investigation before it ever began.

Last weekend, the Idaho Statesman's Rocky Barker and Cynthia Sewell connected some of the dots.

Idaho's revolving door saw Otter's former chief of staff Jason Kreizenbeck sign up as a lobbyist for CCA and ENA; ENA's top Idaho official, Garry Lough, once worked for state Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Luna and Otter's re-election campaign hired ENA employee Martin Bilbao as finance director.

Otter's campaigns have taken \$20,000 from CCA, \$18,250 from ENA and \$35,000 from Qwest/CenturyLink since 2005.

Yet Idaho's voters show no inclination to clean house.

Not only did they hand Otter a third term, but they re-elected Crane and put Denney at the helm of the state's election process.

So a state that was able to get by on a handshake will have to make some changes.

Obviously, the people elected to the Legislature and state offices should tell you who pays them, how much and what they own. It's a time-tested remedy against conflicts of interest.

There's every reason to delay top-level government officials from using their influence as lobbyists. It's called a cooling-off period.

Idaho also could benefit from an independent ethics commission.

But why not go further?

For instance, how about setting up an independent board - consisting of retired judges - who could scrutinize a company's claim that Idaho's procurement laws had been violated? How much money would have been saved if that option had been open to Syringa five years ago?

A new law gives Idaho's attorney general jurisdiction to investigate and prosecute corruption cases at the county level. But when it's a state official involved, local prosecutors must weigh whether to risk their political capital or look the other way. When a tax commissioner breaks the rules, a state treasurer is accused of mishandling a gas card or a legislative leader is strong-arming companies, that's not good enough.

Neither is a cooling off period. There are all kinds of ways around that curb on influence peddling and it really doesn't get at the real problem - a top government official who is negotiating future employment with a special interest while he's supposed to be focused on your business.

Congress has one answer: Whenever a top Capitol Hill aide is being seriously courted by the private sector, the public gets told about it. What if such a rule were in effect when Kreizenbeck and Lough were negotiating with their current employers?

Or Idaho can do nothing for another five years.

But you've been warned. - M.T.