

State leaders give drunken sailors a bad name

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Every Idaho politician worthy of the Republican name campaigns on the platform of fiscal austerity.

Until, of course, they get elected and move to Boise.

That's because they're playing with your money, not theirs.

Exhibit A - Courtesy of the Legislature's own Office of Performance Evaluations, it turns out state agencies are spending \$10 million a year on private attorneys - paying them an average \$268 per hour - rather than turning to Attorney General Lawrence Wasden's staff, which bills out at one third that amount.

That's no surprise to followers of former Transportation Director Pam Lowe's wrongful discharge lawsuit against the state. Rather than pay Wasden's shop the equivalent of \$88 an hour, the transportation board paid the Boise law firm of Holland and Hart \$614,000 to handle the case - which resulted in a \$750,000 settlement check for Lowe.

Same story with the Legislature's public lands task force, which disregarded the attorney general's advice and spent more than \$60,000 on a private lawyer.

Ditto for Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter, who struck out on his own defense of Idaho's same-sex marriage law, paying his private attorneys an estimated \$150,000.

Exhibit B - Six years ago, Otter's best bud and former Administration Director Mike Gwartney meddled with the Idaho Education Network contract, taking the business away from Boise's Syringa Networks and handing it over to Qwest (now CenturyLink). Syringa sued and an Idaho judge voided the contract. The federal government has withdrawn its support of the project. So for at least another year, Idaho taxpayers are making up the difference, an additional \$7.6 million - not to mention legal bills approaching \$1 million.

Exhibit C - At minimum, Idaho taxpayers will spend an extra \$25 million a year - and it could be considerably more - providing medical treatment to people unable to cover their bills. That's because Idaho's Republican Legislature can not bring itself to put aside rigid ideology and extend Medicaid coverage to an estimated 74,000 low-income adults.

Under Medicaid extension, the federal government would never pay less than 90 percent of the costs. But it's part of Obamacare, and Idaho's Republican legislative leadership meekly asserts it cannot round up the votes to pass this provision.

So add it up. The cost of stubbornly clinging to their ways of doing business wastes at least \$42 million a year.

That's better than 1 percent of the state's general fund.

Think what that kind of money would buy.

You could devote another 2 or 3 percentage points to Otter's proposed \$1.476 billion public school budget.

If you added it to Otter's \$258 million college and university budget, you'd end up with an 11 percent increase - more than enough to restore what higher education lost during the Great Recession.

That kind of money would be enough to extend a 5 percent pay increase to every state employee.

Don't want to pad state budgets? How about a cut in state income taxes or even an extended sales tax rebate?

Aren't these the same politicians who run for office every two or four years warning Idahoans against electing a bunch of spendthrift Democrats? But once in office, they're perfectly content to spend like a bunch of drunken sailors.

Sorry. That's being unfair to drunken sailors. At least those sailors are spending their own money. - M.T.