

If two federal probes won't do it, will three?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

If anybody ought to be leading the crusade for Rep. John Rusche's plan to install an independent inspector general to short-circuit waste, fraud and abuse in the state of Idaho, it ought to be the man at the top.

After all, Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter presides over a state that is the subject of two - count them, two - U.S. Department of Justice investigations into how his administration screwed up multimillion-dollar contracts with his own campaign contributors.

What's it going to take for Otter to back the Lewiston Democrat's initiative?

Three federal investigations?

A visit from "60 Minutes"?

In one case, you have Otter's appointed head of the Idaho State Police - Col. Ralph Powell - single-handedly aborting a criminal probe into how Corrections Corporation of America bilked Idaho taxpayers for phantom shifts never worked at the Idaho Correctional Center outside Boise.

After accepting a \$1 million settlement from CCA that many believed to be far less than the state lost, Idaho took over management of what had been known as the violence-plagued "gladiator school."

Otter, who dragged his feet on both firing CCA and relaunching a state investigation, accepted \$20,000 in campaign contributions from CCA.

In the other matter, you have Otter's close friend and former Administration Director Mike Gwartney steering the \$60 million Idaho Education Network contract away from Syringa Networks LLC, an Idaho company that submitted the lowest bid, toward Qwest (now CenturyLink). A state judge voided the contract because it violated Idaho's procurement laws.

Over the years, CenturyLink has contributed \$35,000 to Otter's campaigns.

If you don't think that sounds serious, consider these details:

ISP investigators assigned to take a fresh look at the CCA mess concluded they'd soon be investigating their boss and took the case to the feds - who accepted it in an astonishingly quick 72 hours.

A federal Office of Inspector General looking into the IEN matter has imposed a gag order that extends to some state agencies as well as legislative leaders from both parties.

In both cases, events spun out of control because Idaho lacks political checks and balances. The Republican Party has controlled virtually every major office for a generation. The GOP's relationship with big business is chummy. The state is on a closed communications loop. And it has some of the nation's weakest public ethics laws. Public officials submit to no financial disclosure requirements. There is no independent ethics review board.

And you have in Otter a management style that borders on being disengaged.

Rusche says the situation cries out for a state OIG, empowered to field complaints. The one flaw in his proposal has that office assigned to the governor; a more suitable location would be Attorney General Lawrence Wasden's shop.

But for the sake of argument, imagine if that office had been available to inmates who suffered beatings at ICC. Who's to say a preliminary state OIG investigation might have turned up the understaffing and unpaid shifts - enabling the state to intervene long before the federal courts got involved?

Or say Syringa could have turned to an Idaho inspector general with its complaints five or six years ago? Potentially, an independent review might have resolved the dispute early on - before taxpayers took a bath and students faced the risk of their broadband service being disrupted.

Either way, an OIG report would have provided Otter with something he's apparently not getting from his own staff - warnings when his administration is veering off course.

All of which makes you wonder why Rusche is having so much trouble. His plan barely survived an early skirmish last week in the House State Affairs Committee. GOP lawmakers aren't thrilled with the price tag - \$350,000. They detest the idea of adding a new state agency. And frankly, they're not about to hand a victory to the leader of the House Democrats.

But those same Republican lawmakers ought to check in with their own governor.

Rusche's plan might help the fellow who seems to be having so much trouble running the state. - M.T.