

In Otter's world, Luna's welfare matters most

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

If Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter cared more about the taxpayers, his Department of Administration director, Teresa Luna, would have been sent packing two years ago.

By then the Federal Communications Commission had pulled its support from the \$60 million Idaho Education Network. Federal e-rate dollars covered 75 percent of the cost.

The feds opted out when they learned how former Administration Director and Otter best bud Mike Gwartney had shifted the contract from low bidder Syringa Network LLC to the politically wired Qwest (now CenturyLink).

But Luna kept knowledge of the federal e-rate withdrawal to herself.

So why not dispense with Luna when she finally delivered the bombshell to lawmakers in early 2014 that they would be on the hook for money the federal government would no longer provide? Or how about when all of her assurances that the FCC would reverse its stance proved wildly optimistic?

If not then, why not get rid of her that same year when Luna disclosed she had already renewed Education Networks of America's contract to manage IEN through 2019 - much earlier than necessary?

Certainly the time to change direction came last fall when a state judge voided the IEN contract. Not only did that guarantee the federal funds would not be restored, but the method of reimbursing IEN contractors had been disabled.

And Luna could offer no solution.

At the very least, you'd think Otter would have reacted earlier this spring when legislators took the IEN - and \$5 million - away from Luna's agency and handed the salvage job to state Superintendent of Public Instruction Sherri Ybarra, the woman who replaced Luna's brother Tom.

Ybarra managed to supply schools with more bandwidth at less cost.

No, Otter waited until the bitter end.

When it became clear the Senate was not about to confirm Luna's reappointment, she announced her resignation, effective at the end of the legislative session.

Well, sort of.

Ten days after lawmakers went home, the Spokesman-Review's Betsy Russell discovered Luna is still there.

Still pulling down her \$95,202 salary.

And her assignment is "program specialist" to help interim director Keith Reynolds - the agency's former finance director - learn the ropes.

Learn the ropes?

Reynolds is better prepared for his job than Luna ever was.

He's a CPA, a University of Idaho graduate and a former budget analyst for the governor's office. He ran his own financial services business.

Since 2012, he's been at the Department of Administration.

What he doesn't know, he can learn from the people working around him.

By the way, he is being paid only \$87,048.

How long is this transition?

Initially, a spokeswoman for the Department of Administration suggested it was open-ended.

"I don't know if there's a definite date," Jennifer Pike told Russell. "She and the governor's office have been discussing that."

Later Otter's spokesman Jon Hanian issued a statement: Luna's departure date was set for May 8.

For Sen. Dean Cameron, R-Rupert, who as co-chairman of the budget committee has endured nearly two years of surprises about Luna's handling of the IEN contract, this was just one more.

"Boy, that's news to me," Cameron told Russell. "That's not the way they had conveyed that things would be handled. ... Certainly the implication was that she was leaving."

But that's how Otter manages state government. In an interview with Idaho Public Television's Melissa Davlin, the governor admitted that during his more than eight years in office, he has not terminated one member of the team that has produced such mediocre results.

"I would rather give people an opportunity to be let down easy," Otter said. "Ultimately, I don't think there's a great deal of value in firing people."

Why does Otter, the libertarian and business executive, care more about Teresa Luna's welfare than yours? - M.T.

