

Pension-spiking good-ol'-boys club alive and well

By Wayne Hoffman

Yet again, a former state lawmaker will strike gold thanks to a quirky little loophole in state law that allows legislators to turn a pittance of a retirement benefit into something extraordinary.

Gov. Butch Otter announced that former Senate Pro Tem Bob Geddes of Soda Springs will become the next director of the state Department of Administration. This will be Geddes' second state executive branch stint; Otter had previously plugged him into an ill-fitting role at the state Tax Commission.

Geddes didn't stay long enough to trigger the pension spiking that comes into play once a legislator fills a full-time government job for 42 months. In an unusual move, Geddes left the Tax Commission to lobby for the Idaho Farm Bureau. Geddes' new role at the Department of Administration will allow him to turn an otherwise miniscule annual pension into one paying in excess of \$37,000, provided he clocks another 30 months in the position.

Last legislative session, the House voted 38-32 to end the special perk for lawmakers, but the Senate wouldn't take up the legislation from Republican Steve Harris of Meridian. Meanwhile, another state senator, Democrat Elliot Werk of Boise, caught the brass ring when Otter offered him a position as a state tax commissioner.

This is a special perk that applies only to legislators. Once they nab a job in state government making upwards of \$90,000 or \$100,000 a year (Geddes' salary will likely be around \$95,000), they're able to parlay years of work as a part-time legislator into a big retirement benefit that is unequalled.

This special privilege for elected officials allows them to score a lucrative benefit at the expense of the taxpayers they were elected to serve. Suddenly our "public servants" aren't serving us as much as we're serving them by guaranteeing an exclusive retirement package.

Equally problematic—and not often discussed—is the fact that Idaho's retirement policy that rewards friends of the executive branch is one that breeds a class of pliant legislators who will do nothing to jeopardize their future employability with the governor. Gone are the usual and necessary checks and balances that lawmakers are supposed to bring when interacting with the executive branch; too many legislators are looking for the next big thing: a steady job, a steady paycheck and an extremely stable and stratospherically more rewarding retirement benefit than anything they'd be able to otherwise achieve in their private sector jobs and Statehouse political career that requires standing for election every two years.

At its best, it's the sort of thing that makes taxpayers resentful and suspicious of state government and the people serving in it. At its worst, it's the type of policy that has the potential to breed corruption and cronyism because lawmakers are too docile to really question anything coming from a governor who is able to dispense high-paying jobs and happily-ever-after retirement packages.

The Legislature will continue to vigorously defend this special retirement benefit despite the fact that there is zero benefit to the public for having it. That is, they'll do so as long as voters are willing to let them get away with it.

