

Idaho lawmakers scrutinize state's contracting system

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Lawmakers are considering revamping the state's contracting system after seeing a string of scandals plague some of Idaho's most expensive contracts for years.

An Idaho legislative committee met for the first time Wednesday to begin scrutinizing how state contracts are drafted and monitored. The committee was commissioned after the Legislature this year rejected proposals from the state's purchasing division seeking to fine-tune the oversight process.

Now it's up to the panel to finalize its own recommendations before the 2016 session.

"I still need help with 'How do you foresee what you can't foresee?'" said Senate Majority Leader Bart Davis of Idaho Falls. "I don't know how you come up with a recommendation for something like that. We're still working that out."

Criticism of Idaho's contracting system came to a peak after a district judge in February voided a \$60 million contract that provided broadband access in public schools. The judge determined state officials violated Idaho procurement laws by amending the contract after it was awarded.

Around the same time, state evaluators revealed Idaho wasted \$61 million on a software system used to track and improve student performance because it contracted a vendor unequipped to serve a statewide platform.

A year before, private prison giant Corrections Corp. of America pulled out of Idaho after more than a decade of scandals and lawsuits surrounding its operation of the state's largest prison. CCA has acknowledged it showed the state incorrect staffing reports that fell short of the contractually obligated amount of guards on duty in 2012.

Proposals presented Wednesday focused primarily on determining which state entities get to approve contracts and clarifying who is in charge of monitoring high-dollar contracts.

Neither proposal would have prevented the school broadband contract from being voided, but they still need to be discussed, Davis said.

For example, legislative auditors estimated Idaho spent roughly \$1.5 billion last year to issue more than 41,400 contracts involving at least six different types of state entities.

This means that while Idaho has a dedicated purchasing division, state agencies also have authority to draft and approve contracts. This has created a decentralized system, where agencies have their own monitoring policies and unequal resources to enforce contract obligations.

"We're tracking how much money is being spent, but we don't know how many contracts we have as a whole," said Republican Rep. Neil Anderson of Blackfoot, co-chairman of the committee. "I think a more centralized system would help with that."

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