

# Yesterday's ethical red flags are today's costly errors

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

Three years ago, the Center for Public Integrity raised a lot of red flags about corruption in Idaho. It graded the state at D-minus and it would have been worse if not for:

- The voters, who in 1974 opened up campaign finance and lobbyist activity to public disclosure through the Sunshine Law initiative.
- The founders, who used the state constitution to keep state budget-writing before the prying eyes of the public.
- The courts, which guaranteed Idahoans access to public records.

Meanwhile, Idaho's elected officials have bequeathed such a bubbling stew of ethical lapses that the Center gives their handiwork some of lowest rankings in the United States.

Only three states - including Idaho - say you can't find out how people in elected office make their money. Is a legislator acting on behalf of your best interest or his? You'll never know.

No independent panel scrutinizes the behavior of top elected or appointed officials. In fact, no citizen can hold a legislator to account. Lawmakers police themselves.

And the revolving door between public servant and private lobbyist is spinning ever faster with no cooling off period to slow things down.

Then as now, lawmakers have resisted making any improvements.

Then as now, Democrats complain.

Then, it was former state Rep. Jim Hansen, D-Boise: "Because you don't have a clean disclosure process, what do we have to go on? Just gossip, till it reaches the point of a lawsuit."

Now, it's Rep. John Rusche, D-Lewiston, who told the Idaho Statesman's Bill Dentzer: "We have a structure that allows (ethical lapses) and we have the evidence that it happens. Why aren't people out there with pitchforks and torches demanding change?"

Then, the Center ranked Idaho 41st for integrity.

Now the state has moved up to 26th place. But don't be fooled. Idaho merely stood still while so much has gotten so much worse in so many other states.

Besides, three years ago, you could shrug off the various scandals from the spectators' seats.

So what if former state Rep. Phil Hart, R-Hayden, did double duty as a tax protester while writing tax laws you had to follow?

Who cares if former State Tax Commission Chairman Royce Chigbrow was caught playing favorites with corporate taxpayers?

Who got heartburn when former Senate Resources and Conservation Committee Chairman Monty Pearce, R-New Plymouth, helped open Idaho to oil and natural gas development - after he had signed a lease with Snake River Oil and Gas?

It didn't pinch your wallet.

Just after the 2012 integrity report was released, however, former Idaho Transportation Director Pam Lowe collected a \$750,000 settlement - after accusing Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter's administration of steering money toward politically wired contractors.

Next up was the Corrections Corporation of America scandal. Reports of rising inmate violence led to CCA's admission that it had understaffed the Idaho Correctional Center outside Boise - and billed the state for shifts never worked. In the middle of all that, Otter's former chief of staff, Jason Kreizenbeck, signed up as a lobbyist for CCA.

Who knows how much this cost you? The Board of Correction cut short its forensic audit and settled for a \$1 million payout many believe was inadequate, while Otter's appointed chief at the Idaho State Police, Col. Ralph Powell, never carried out the criminal investigation he was assigned.

Then there was Treasurer Ron Crane, whose handling of mortgage-backed securities left a pool of money he managed for the state more than \$10 million short. Earlier this year, the state closed the books on the last of those investments and wrote off the final \$8.7 million.

Over at the Department of Administration, Otter's best pal and former Director Mike Gwartney interfered with a state bidding process, handing the massive Idaho Education Network to Qwest (now CenturyLink) while cutting out Syringa Network LLC. First the federal government yanked its support for the project, so Idaho taxpayers paid millions more. Then a state judge voided the whole arrangement - and when individual school districts negotiated their own contracts, Idahoans learned how overpriced the entire IEN had been.

Finally, former schools Superintendent Tom Luna so bungled the Schoolnet information system that the state is out \$61 million - including \$21 million from the J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation.

So the price of ignoring these red flags is escalating. Any bets how much higher it will go by the time the Center gets around to issuing its next Idaho report card? - M.T.