Idaho yawns at latest treasurer's office bombshell

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Another expose about how Idaho state Treasurer Ron Crane puts his political and financial interests ahead of yours should beget more indigestion and consternation.

After all, Crane's former deputy, Christopher Priest, just delivered another bombshell.

Priest, who spent 10 years with Crane's Investment Division, told the Idaho Statesman's Bill Dentzer that he was fired for speaking truth to power. Priest has filed the precursor to a whistleblower lawsuit against his former employer

What happened?

Nothing.

That sound you're hearing across the state is a collective yawn.

After all, we already know Crane manipulated public investments entrusted to him.

During the 2008-09 financial collapse, he shifted money from a state tax fund to cover losses on distressed mortgage-backed securities purchased on behalf of a pool Crane managed for Idaho's local governments.

Crane avoided a potential rebuke from Standard and Poor's and a political black eye on the eve of his 2010 re-election campaign.

But it cost you millions.

When legislative auditors uncovered the mess, Crane obfuscated and cried foul, contending they had got it wrong - until the state closed the books on those securities a year ago and wrote off the final $8.7 million loss.

We already know lawmakers clipped Crane's wings, subjecting his investment decisions to a five-member oversight board appointed by the

governor.

We already know he didn't mind living well on the company dime. During trips to New York City to secure Idaho's bond rating, Crane famously squired himself and legislative guests around Manhattan in stretch limos. How much of this was going on is obscured because what Crane spent was folded into a contractor's bill, which was then deducted from bonding fees.

We already know he at one point billed Idaho taxpayers for nearly $8,000 in gas during his commute to work - something that could have led to criminal charges had the Canyon County prosecutors opted to pursue it.

And we already know Crane devoted resources from his office, including money and staff time, on a "Smart Women Smart, Money" conference through a nonprofit organization he created.

So what's really new here?

Well, Priest contends:

- Work Crane's office could perform has been farmed out to Idaho Trust Bank at a cost of $75,000 a year - without competitive bidding.
- Much the same thing occurred when Crane gave Utah financial adviser Cheryl Cook a contract to help manage tax anticipation notes.
- Again, without a competitive bid, Crane hired Republican operative Mike Tracy at $4,000 a month to provide public relation services - even when other members of Crane's agency found Tracy's work unsatisfactory.
- When the state stood in a position to reclaim some of the losses from the 2008-09 investments, Crane closed that door by signing a settlement agreement with Victory Capital.
- Crane is frequently absent from work and his executive assistant, LeAnn Sullivan, spends her time on the "Smart Women, Smart Money" conference and pressures other employees to help her.
- Crane continues to pad his expense account - pressuring private companies to cover expensive meals or spending tax dollars if they won't.

Because he raised concerns about these practices - and answered legislative auditors' questions forthrightly - Priest says he was accused of insubordination and fired. He's seeking at least $207,460 in damages.

He may get his day in court.

But Idaho voters shrugged off the earlier charges in 2014 when they re-elected Crane over a better-qualified opponent, Twin Falls certified public accountant Deborah Silver.

Crane had the one attribute that mattered to Idaho's lazy voters - the Republican nomination.

Their next opportunity to make things right won't come along for another two years. - M.T.