

Just look at what Pam Lowe got started

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

When former Idaho Transportation Director Pam Lowe got the boot three years ago, she looked like the typical political scapegoat.

Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's efforts to shore up highway and bridge financing through a gas tax and registration fee increase crashed and burned in the Legislature. Who better to take the fall than the woman at the helm?

But Lowe wouldn't go quietly. Her lawsuit didn't merely allege wrongful termination. She shocked Idaho by challenging the state's self-image as a relatively clean place to do business by arguing:

- Political interference - By law, only the transportation board can fire the director and even then, it must give cause - such as "inefficiency, neglect of duty, malfeasance and nonfeasance." Lowe received positive evaluations until the moment she was sacked.
- Gender discrimination - The first woman to head transportation, Lowe contended former Transportation Board member Gary Blick of Castleford remarked at the time of her appointment: "No little girl would be able to run this department" and "What are we going to do when she decides to start a family?"
- Cronyism - What forced her ouster, Lowe said, was her attempt to rein in spending on a \$50 million project management contract with road builders URS, formerly Washington Group International, and Denver-based CH2M Hill for the \$1 billion "Connecting Idaho" highway program. As the Spokesman-Review's Betsy Russell reported, the state now has provided nearly \$83 million in management fees.

For such a startling series of allegations to be proved, Lowe would have had to show her case was something unusual.

No longer.

Take the sexual discrimination charge. Since 2009, it's become clear Otter values his male lieutenants far more than the female members of his cabinet. Otter's highest-ranking woman officer, Agriculture Director Celia Gould, earns less than 15 men in Otter's organization. The median salary for women at the top tier of state government is \$85,446. The median for the male officials is \$103,002. And Otter has three times more men working for him at that level than women.

At the time, Lowe contended that former Senate Transportation Committee Chairman John McGee, R-Caldwell, was politically pressuring her to support the Connecting Idaho management contract by threatening to pass a bill giving the governor authority to fire

her. Since then, McGee left the Senate in disgrace amid allegations that he sexually harassed a female Senate staffer.

Lowe's predecessor, former Transportation Director David Ekern, also was fired, but he was allowed to resign, collect accrued leave and a check for \$20,000 to \$25,000.

When the Transportation Board hired Director Brian Ness, it paid him \$22,000 a year more than Lowe received.

What about cronyism?

When Lowe filed her lawsuit, nobody had paid much attention to then-State Tax Commission Chairman Royce Chigbrow, who would later resign amid a flurry of charges that he was cutting sweetheart tax deals with corporations.

At the time, nobody heard much about Syringa Networks' charge that former Department of Administration Director - and Otter pal - Mike Gwartney excluded the company from the Idaho Education Network to the benefit of Qwest. The case later got tossed.

Back then, it seemed unimaginable that Corrections Corp. of America would be allowed to retain its lucrative contract managing the inmate violence-prone Idaho Correctional Center even after it reached a settlement with prisoners and the American Civil Liberties Union. Or that Otter would be the second largest recipient of CCA campaign cash in the United States. Or that Otter's chief of staff, Jason Kreizenbeck, would be negotiating a new job working for CCA's lobbyist at the time the lawsuit was being settled.

Certainly, seeing a national integrity index rank Idaho's executive and legislative branches as poised for corruption would have shocked Gem State residents.

Three years of scandals later, not only is the credibility of Lowe's assertions enhanced, but she also seems to be on a more solid legal footing. A federal judge has ruled Idaho's transportation director indeed does retain protection from political interference and dismissal without cause. To appeal it, the state must double down on the \$540,479 it already has paid a law firm to defend against Lowe's lawsuit.

Lowe's allegations outraged Idahoans three years ago.

Today, with state government adrift on a current of sexism and cronyism, her lawsuit has become part of the background noise. - M.T.