

Give Hoffman points for exposing self-dealing

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

When Idaho Freedom Foundation President Wayne Hoffman's right, he's right. And Hoffman has never been more right than in his steadfast condemnation of the sordid practice of self-dealing going on in Boise anytime a top-paying administrative job opens up.

As reported on IFF's IdahoReporter.com, a steady parade of legislators recently have made the leap into Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's administration, not only with a sizeable bump in pay but also a comfortable pension that comes with it.

Only state lawmakers are able to apply years of service in the Legislature - which pays them a rather paltry \$16,500 a year - toward a pension based on a much more generous salary at the top of the administrative pyramid. All that's required is for them to remain at the higher paying job for 42 months.

The most recent example is Sen. Dean Cameron, R-Rupert. The co-chairman of the Legislature's budget-writing committee, Cameron just got appointed to run Otter's Department of Insurance.

Had he quit the Legislature this instant, Cameron would be entitled to \$750 a month. But as head of the insurance agency, Cameron's sure to earn at least \$102,273. If he remains there the next 31/2 years, the Rupert Republican will draw a monthly pension of \$4,845.

Before that was Otter's most recent choice for the State Tax Commission, former Sen. Elliot Werk, D-Boise. Based on his 14 years of legislative service, Werk was in line to collect \$420 a month. Assuming he serves 42 months at the tax commission, where he's paid nearly \$89,000 a year, the Boise Democrat's monthly pension would rise to \$2,596.

Otter also tapped former Senate President Pro Tem Bob Geddes to clean up the mess Director Teresa Luna left behind at the Department of Administration. Between his 16 years in the Legislature and a year spent earning about \$85,000 at the State Tax Commission, Geddes was in line for a monthly pension of \$1,052. Forty-two more months at Administration, where the current acting director earns more than \$87,000 a year, will allow Geddes to collect retirement benefits of \$2,972 a month.

Some of this is conjecture. Pension benefits are personal and private, not subject to public disclosure. All we know for certain is what these officials earned as legislators, where their administrative salaries are likely to be set and how the state pension formula operates. Occasionally, it turns out a former lawmaker has elected not to take the bump - as was the case a few years ago when ex-state Rep. Jim Kempton joined the Public Utilities Commission after he retired.

But the practice is well established.

Ironically, one of Hoffman's acolytes, Secretary of State Lawrence (Boss) Denney, is the best known example.

Had Denney simply retired from the House after two decades, he'd be entitled to a retirement check of \$600 a month. By getting elected to his current post, which pays \$102,667, Denney is in line for a pension spike to \$4,021 a month.

Denney got his pension bump by appealing to the voters, not currying favor with a governor. However, Denney single-handedly preserved the perk. As House speaker, he unilaterally killed then-Rep. Dennis Lake's attempt to reform the system.

That wasn't the first attempt.

Back in the mid-1990s, then-Gov. Phil Batt challenged his Republican colleagues to drop the pension spike.

This year, the House voted twice to end it - only to have Senate State Affairs Committee Chairman Curt

McKenzie, R-Nampa, bury the measure in his desk drawer.

As Hoffman argues, this isn't just a case of politicians feathering their nests. Dangling the potential of a comfortable retirement before lawmakers gives governors enormous political clout. Every time the governor calls, a lawmaker confronts a potential conflict of interest between his constituents and his own well-being.

Ordinarily, Hoffman carries a big stick in Boise, especially with Republicans who are wary of getting crossways with him or the Idaho Freedom Foundation.

But when it comes to preserving this opportunity to cash in with a lucrative state pension, not even the dreaded Idaho Freedom Foundation deters them. - M.T.