

Under closer scrutiny, Labrador hits the brakes

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

When a speeding motorist slams on the brakes at the sight of a squad car, the cop is unlikely to be impressed.

It's too little, too late.

Bear that in mind as you ponder Congressman Raul Labrador's latest campaign finance disclosures.

In May 2011 - shortly after his first election - the Idaho Republican began paying his wife Becca about \$2,000 a month to manage the campaign books.

At the time, Labrador told the Spokesman-Review's Betsy Russell he hired his wife because he wanted someone he could trust.

"I have had an employee steal money from me when I was in my professional (law) practice, so I am more than careful," Labrador said.

Perhaps that was understandable for a congressman just getting started. But as Labrador approached his fourth term, he was making a deliberate choice to keep his wife on the campaign payroll rather than find a professional accountant.

And all that time - at \$100 an hour for 20 hours a month - campaign contributions from special interests such as New York Life Insurance, Intel, AT&T, Zion's Bank, JR Simplot Co., Amalgamated Sugar Co., and the National Automobile Dealers Association - were being diverted into a Labrador family budget already amply supported by a yearly congressional paycheck of \$174,000.

Even by the lax ethical standards of Capitol Hill, this was audacious.

For one thing, the U.S. House actually voted to ban the practice in 2007 in the aftermath of the scandals tied to lobbyist Jack Abramoff. Had the U.S. Senate agreed, Becca Labrador's paychecks would have been illegal.

But it's still frowned upon. When Craig Holman, government affairs lobbyist for the watchdog group Public Citizen, looked into this in 2011, he identified no more than 20 members of Congress and the Senate hiring close family members on campaigns.

The next year, USA Today's survey turned up about 32 of the 535 House and Senate members who employed even distant relatives on their campaigns.

And those who do so typically turn to family members to hold down expenses.

Not this time.

"This is one of the most generous salaries I've seen from a lawmaker or candidate to pay a family member to work on their campaign," Holman says.

Or to put it another way, the \$138,000 Labrador drew from his campaign account since 2011 would have supported an average Idaho household for almost three years.

At the same time, Labrador was relying on his congressional office as well as the campaign to lease two cars - a 2014 Ford Explorer and a 2013 Ford Taurus, a practice Labrador's Democratic rival James Piotrowski outlined in last fall's campaign. Only 59 members of Congress leased vehicles last year with public funds.

Labrador could rebuff media critics and political opponents because he was a Republican incumbent in a safe GOP seat.

Now, however, he's rolling the dice by running for governor. In next spring's GOP primary, he's facing much tougher opposition from Lt. Gov. Brad Little and Boise developer Tommy Ahlquist.

So, as Russell reported last week, Labrador's campaign cut its last checks to Becca Labrador on Jan. 2 for the November 2016 payroll, and on Jan. 18, for the December 2016 payroll.

Becca Labrador is not getting compensation from either her husband's congressional or gubernatorial campaigns, campaign manager China Gum told Russell.

Meanwhile, Labrador paid \$12,000 - a fair market value - from his personal funds to purchase the Taurus from the campaign.

If Labrador believed he was doing nothing wrong by employing his wife and leasing a car with campaign contributions, why stop now?

The would-be governor offered Russell no explanation.

"You have a lot more latitude when you're only running against a Democrat in the 1st Congressional District. Now he's got two big-name, well-financed Republicans in a gubernatorial race, and every little thing could count," College of Idaho political scientist Jasper LiCalzi told Russell. "It sounds like he's trying to clear the decks of some of the issues that have been brought up in the past, take some of the ammunition away from the other two. ... I think it's pretty smart on his part."

Smart? Maybe.

Ethical? Not if you define integrity as doing the right thing when nobody's looking. - M.T.