

Statehouse sidelights . . .

Early audit leak may bring reverberations

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The Joint Finance Appropriation Committee and Attorney General David H. Leroy must be commended for launching an investigation of the premature release of early legislative reports.

The probe is doubly valued because it may lead to a well-known Republican legislator. The JFAC is Republican controlled and Leroy is a Republican.

The JFAC adopted a formal motion at its session last week directing Leroy to take the action after a hearing revealed that release of such early reports are in violation of state law and are punishable as a misdemeanor.

The news story was handled by a United Press International newsman at Boise, Robert Van Buskirk, who said he will refuse to disclose his sources. The Post-Register uses the Associated Press wire services.

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The JFAC voted unanimously to authorize the probe, although Republican members, such as Sens. Walter E. Yarbrough, R-Grand View, the caucus chairman, and Dean Van Engelen, R-Burley, who said he is interested in a U.S. Senate race, were not exactly enthusiastic over such an action. They expressed their views to this effect at the JFAC hearings.

The investigation, however, was demanded by one of the committee's veteran and most knowledgeable members, Sen. Mike Mitchell, D-Lewiston, and House Minority Leader Patricia McDermott.

It must be remembered this was a report that was going to be released, anyway, in a couple of weeks. It was not intended to hide anything. It was to give the legislators an early chance to study the report and also an opportunity for the division director to take corrective actions.

The early release justifiably prompted the Division of Administration director, Bartlett Brown, to charge the legislative audit was slanted and politically motivated. Actually there was little in the report that was of major violations, centered mostly on petty over expenditures, such as too many trips and excessive taxi, hotel and

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Audit leak probe

BOISE — Key figure in pressing the investigation on early leak of a legislative audit of the Division of Administration is Attorney General David H. Leroy.

other travel costs among some personnel. Among those mentioned were Diane Plastino, daughter of this writer, whose performance in management was termed excellent by Brown.

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Leroy said he has launched the investigation but emphasizes two points: (1) that he will concentrate on those who had access or unauthorized access to the report; and (2) that he didn't plan to cause confrontation with the media people involved, meaning Van Buskirk, and their confidential sources.

Most newsmen with integrity likely would not use a report marked confidential unless authorized by someone in charge . . . or the matter was of overriding public need to know.

This then raises the question of whether Leroy should avoid

confrontation with the news media if the scope of the investigation demands it.

Newsmen, including this one, are zealous of protecting confidential sources, but in all such cases they should not border on illegal procurement.

Perhaps Leroy may find it necessary for the confrontation to get the desired information.

The case already has caused tightening of release of early reports.

State agencies now are now reluctant to distribute early reports beforehand for release later. Such confidential reports also may be withheld from legislators until the proper time.

The early release of such a confidential report to a newsmen likely is no great violation, but it could bring political reverberations to a Republican lawmaker.