

Spokesman Review, Wednesday, Aug. 19, 2009 – by Betsy Russell

Idaho site offers nitty-gritty on spending

BOISE – A nonprofit group on Tuesday launched a “government transparency” Web site that offers details about state and local government spending in Idaho, from a mayor’s salary to an agency’s computer purchases.

“Transparency is a nonpartisan issue – it’s not Republican, it’s not Democrat, it’s not something that typically divides people,” said Wayne Hoffman, executive director of the Idaho Freedom Foundation, a nonpartisan think tank behind OurIdaho.com.

Through a series of public records request, Hoffman, a former newspaper reporter and former spokesman for then-GOP Congressman Bill Sali, gathered salary and expenditure data from all Idaho state agencies, major cities, school districts and highway districts going back 18 months.

“Over the next several months, we’re going to be adding to that data,” he said. “Without that data, how can we begin to have a debate about the size of government? ... Hopefully it’ll shed some new light on how your government operates.”

Rep. Phil Hart, R-Athol, proposed a state-run government transparency Web site during this year’s legislative session, but the measure was rejected amid cost questions. State Controller Donna Jones also said then that her office was working toward such a service but wouldn’t propose starting it amid the state budget crunch.

Hoffman’s site is funded by private donations. He said the state controller’s office was helpful in gathering the data.

Idaho Senate President Pro-Tem Bob Geddes, R-Soda Springs, recalled an incident when he had trouble getting public records from his local school district.

“I think it’s a great thing – I’m kind of a proponent of what Wayne has done is done a lot of transparency as well,” he said. “... research that a lot of citizens may not know how to do or may not be able to do.”

Among the data on the site are salaries for state and local employees. A search showed the governor’s salary at \$111,989 a year and the mayor of Coeur d’Alene’s at \$2,700 a month, a figure the city confirmed.

Hoffman ran into trouble when he submitted his information request to Coeur d’Alene, which refused to release employees’ first names on the grounds that that would constitute identifying their gender. Only first initials are shown for Coeur d’Alene city employees. “We’re not done with Coeur d’Alene,” Hoffman said. “I’m sure they’ll recognize that state law is explicit – names of public employees are public, both the first and last names.”