

William Marble <lenorebill@lewiston.com>
12/18/2002 11:00:00 PM

Record Type:Record

To: David C. Childs A-76comments/OMB/EOP@EOP

cc:

Subject: Privatizing federal jobs will not lead to savings, better efficiency (look at the airport screeners!!!!!!!!!!!!)

Privatizing federal jobs will not lead to savings, better efficiency - Guest editorial, December 18

By LIZ GUPTON for the Missoulian

Let's see if we understand this right: First, take a relatively uncomplicated task like searching people at airports (for bombs, guns, knives, scissors) and create a new federal workforce because contractors weren't getting the job done well. Next, take the very complex management of public resources - forests, wildlife, watersheds - and study those jobs to see how many of them could be privatized (Missoulian editorial, Nov. 27). Does this maneuver make sense? Not if the goal really is to save the taxpayers money and to make the government more efficient.

The cost of all the studies to see which ones could be privatized is anybody's guess. The Forest Service spent nearly a million dollars to hire a contractor to recommend which jobs should be studied and in what order. Jobs under study now are information technology; road, fleet and facility maintenance; and temporary employees.

The theory - or at least a stated objective - behind privatizing government jobs is to save taxpayers' money. The Missoulian editorial made this observation: "It's a myth that private companies always are better and more efficient than the government - remember Montana's disastrous experiment with privatized mental-health management for the poor?" This is only one of many examples where privatizing turned sour.

The research arm of Congress, the General Accounting Office states: "During the long history of our work in this area (contracting), GAO has consistently found that evaluating the overall effectiveness of contracting out decisions and verifying the estimated savings reported by agencies is extremely difficult after the fact. As a result, we cannot convincingly prove nor disprove that the results of federal agencies' contracting out decisions have been beneficial and cost-effective."

The size of the contract workforce is unknown to the government and American taxpayers. Paul Light, the Douglas Dillon Senior Fellow and founding director of the Center for Public Service at the Brookings Institution, writes in his book, *The True Size of Government*: "The government knows virtually nothing about its shadow - the ever-expanding number of politically well-connected contractors who are taking more and more work from federal employees. Neither the Office of Personnel Management nor the Office of Management and Budget has ever counted the full-time equivalent non-federal workforce, let alone analyzed its appropriateness."

Appropriate or not, the president's OMB is on a mission to "compete" federal jobs through a process known as "A-76" studies - a time-consuming, detailed examination of government functions to look for cost efficiencies. As Forest Service employees with many years of experience, we have worked hard to find those efficiencies. We call it "doing more with less," and with declining budgets for years, we haven't had much choice. Now the agency will spend precious time and resources studying our jobs to see if a contractor could do them cheaper. We, the rank-and-file workers, will be relying on a handful of hopefully qualified study team members to produce a report with a satisfactory bottom line - in a very short time frame. And time is critical. New time

limits will be set for A-76 competitions, with consequences for agencies that fail to meet them. The proposed limit for most competitions will be 12 months, and if in-house employees fail to submit a proposal by the deadline, their jobs could be directly outsourced to the private sector. Past studies at the Defense Department have taken up to three years.

The A-76 process has been the vehicle for outsourcing more than 300,000 federal jobs since 1993. Today the number of federal employees is less under President Kennedy in 1961. Often, federal employees are replaced with lower-paid contract employees who receive fewer benefits, if any at all. The social cost of this dislocation is borne by taxpayers, while private contractors and CEOs reap hefty profits from the \$144 billion-per-year contracting budget.

The Missoulian editorial aptly predicted that such contractors could be located anywhere, allowing a migration of federal salaries out of rural Montana to city centers - potentially out of state or out of the country. Many rural communities would feel a severe economic impact with the loss of these jobs.

There are a lot of other issues, including collateral duties, that don't fit neatly into A-76 studies. Some employees leave their regular jobs to serve as firefighters during fire season. We've been warned that to be competitive for our jobs, we'd be wise to forget our firefighting duties and maintain strict boundaries of our functional areas. We cannot imagine how expensive a 100-percent dedicated firefighting workforce might be - either federal or privatized. The efficiency of our current system is similar to the military reserve and National Guard program; our firefighters are activated as needed.

Seasonal temporary employees are one of the first groups to be studied. It is conceivable that your sons and daughters will no longer be able to work at the local ranger station during the summer, instead those jobs could be picked up by green-carded workers from out of the country.

OMB needs to reconsider its draconian changes to the A-76 studies. As a start, extending the comment period would allow the public an opportunity to learn more about and understand the process. Citizens should take the time to learn how the studies - and privatization - will affect their public services. The recent Federal Register lists a deadline of Dec. 19 for public comment. You can send your comments to A-76comments@omb.eop.gov. OMB will also accept comments via fax at 202-395-5105.