

The Cover Oregon Fiasco: Part 1 — The Investigation

The controversy over the nation's worst ObamaCare health insurance exchange rollout continues.

It's Oregon's Cover Oregon. Improvements are being made to the website and now health insurance agents can enroll people through the website. But the general public still cannot and enrollment is being done the old-fashioned way — by hand.



We're now at the beginning of March. As you know, the website was supposed to be working on October 1st of last year. Some experts say it'll be the first of next year before it is working properly but no one really knows for sure. State officials say progress is being made.

What is known is that Oregon Governor John Kitzhaber has launched an investigation into what went wrong. He has made a few comments on the website but says he won't really make a pronouncement until his investigation is done.

Meanwhile, others like newspapers *The Oregonian* in Portland and Salem, Oregon's *The Statesman Journal* are investigating and coming to some interesting but not surprising conclusions.

Revelations are being made that state officials were warned by technical experts in May of last year that Cover Oregon wasn't going to work. Among them is analyst Ying Kwong — a consultant for Oregon's Department of Administrative Services (DAS) — who sent a series of emails to the head of the DAS and said the managers of Cover Oregon were being "intellectually dishonest."

Kwong said the political momentum to launch Cover Oregon fueled the disaster. He likened what was happening to website at the time to the old horror movie *The Blob*. The monster in that movie could not be stopped because its liquid-like shape allowed it to go anywhere. "You simply don't know how to shoot this beast, because it does not have a known anatomy with the normal vital organs that make it tick," Kwong wrote.

Others sending emails and communications of equal concern were Bob Cummings of Oregon's Legislative Fiscal Office and experts at Maximus, the company hired to ensure the website's quality and information accuracy.

They were ignored.

The Portland, Oregon newspaper *The Oregonian* came to some conclusions about the Cover Oregon fiasco:

- As far back as November of 2011 analysts were warning state officials that Cover Oregon's website was not going to work.
- Those running Cover Oregon ignored the warnings and — while worried — plowed ahead anyway and launched an untested and mostly unfinished exchange.
- Oregon leadership — including Governor John Kitzhaber — read some of the warnings but ignored them or were convinced by Oregon Health Authority leadership that things were okay.
- One of the leaders of the project — IT manager Carolyn Lawson — silenced critics like Maximus.

The governor continues to distance himself from the fiasco and said he had no clue the massive problems existed. Many on the governor's senior staff are pointing fingers at former Cover Oregon head Rocky King. They — including Oregon Health Authority head Bruce Goldberg — say they believed King when he told them things were on track.

But King disputes that he told them the website development was working. Just the opposite. King contends he tried to warn them that disaster was imminent.

Part of the problem — says *The Oregonian* — is a feud between Cover Oregon leaders and the Oregon Health Authority. The authority was supposed to supply key systems to Cover Oregon and the website's head Rocky King says he couldn't get them. King — as noted — said he never did meet with the governor but did share his concerns with his senior staff and with Oregon Health Authority officials.

He said he was continually assured that all is well.

Another was conflicts between the firms hired to assure website quality and Cover Oregon's Lawson. Fed up with criticism of her project, Lawson moved to shut them up. From there the feuding and finger pointing continued months on end until Cover Oregon reached October 1 and a rollout that failed magnificently.

King said he isn't sure why the state launched it knowing it would not work. "I don't think we have any business launching an exchange whose primary functions of selling and buying are not verified and validated to be ready," he said. "How can the state conduct business like this?" King said.

Now the Oregon Legislature is involved — sort of. The election year is uppermost in the minds of most legislators and that's hampering repair efforts. Both Republicans and Democrats loved the idea of Cover Oregon when it was created so there is political liability on both sides of the political aisle.

Political posturing is the order of the day. Republican amendments to a House bill to help with some Cover Oregon fixes were submitted too late according to Democratic

leadership so they were voted down along party lines. Immediately Republicans issued a news release stating if a fix isn't reached, it's not their fault and that Democrats aren't cooperating.

Republicans say they want Cover Oregon's head to report to the Legislature with a new business plan and data to help the Legislature determine the future of the exchange. It's one of the amendments voted down.

Source: *The Oregonian* — http://www.oregonlive.com/health/index.ssf/2014/01/cover_oregon_health_exchange_f.html

Source: *The Statesman Journal* — <http://www.statesmanjournal.com/article/20140225/COLUMN0109/302250026/Cover-Oregon-reform-closer-despite-politics>