NOAA sought magician, now wants plans to disappear

May 4 2012, By SETH BORENSTEIN , AP Science Writer

(AP) -- A federal agency needs illusionist David Copperfield to help escape from criticism over now-canceled plans to hire a speaker to train agency leaders using "magic tools."

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is in hot water because on May 1 it posted a notice seeking a magician motivational speaker for a June leadership conference in suburban Maryland. The agency said presentations should include "physical energizers, magic tricks, puzzles, brain teasers, word games, humor and teambuilding exercises." It asked for the performer to create "a unique model of translating magic and principals of the psychology of magic, magic tools, techniques and experiences into a method of teaching leadership."

In an eight page bid solicitation, the agency in charge of weather, climate and oceans said it wanted to use the emotional intelligence techniques of a prominent Harvard professor who has written five books, but misspelled his name.

The posting came weeks after the General Services Administration was embroiled in a scandal involving a Las Vegas conference that cost nearly $1 million and included a mind reader.

Congressmen and senators called NOAA's plans frivolous and ridiculous. House Science Committee Chairman Ralph Hall, R-Tex., gave NOAA Administrator Jane Lubchenco a week to come up with an explanation and details about past spending on magicians and comedians.

Sen. Scott Brown, R-Mass., in a statement, said "this is a low point even by Washington's standards" and added that "the best magic that NOAA could perform would be to make this wasteful spending disappear."

His wish was granted.

After NOAA's notice was reported by Government Executive magazine, the agency canceled the magic gig. An agency spokesman said NOAA's top lawyer is looking into the plans. According to NOAA, the agency had planned to spend about $3,500 on the speaker about the "magic of change."

"No speakers have been hired or confirmed for this training session," NOAA spokesman Scott Smullen wrote in an email.

The advertisement for the magician sounded like they were trying to hire a specific person, said Steve Ellis, vice president for the watchdog group Taxpayers for Common Sense. He said what makes NOAA's plans so surprising is that someone thought about hiring a magician after the GSA scandal raised people's awareness about silly conference spending.

"It gets filed under `What were they thinking'?" Ellis said. "It boggles the mind that somebody thought that this would pass the laugh test of the public."

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