

State's airline ticket policies need review — Our view

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(Photo: Getty Images/iStockphoto)

Sometimes, a bargain isn't a bargain.

Take a recent report from the Louisiana Inspector General's Office that revealed state agencies spent more than \$500,000 on unused airplane tickets over 2½ years.

The money went for 1,190 tickets bought by 112 state agencies and not used within one year of purchase, according to a report released Friday.

Let's put that in perspective — Based on 1,190 unused tickets in a 30-month period, that's 39.6 booked and unused flights per month. That's nine missed flights a week.

Louisiana State University and other universities accounted for the most money, with \$123,000 worth of tickets bought by LSU expiring during that period.

LSU athletics had the second-largest amount: \$43,000.

The money was originally spent on non-refundable airline tickets. As regular air travelers know, non-refundable tickets are typically the lowest fares offered. To that end, it is encouraging to see state officials and government workers are trying to get the best deal when it comes to traveling on the taxpayer's tab.

But, apparently, when plans changed, that thrift-minded approach fell by the wayside.

Also of note, the amount of unused tickets has grown significantly recently.

In a 2010 report, it was found that state agencies let \$230,000 in airline tickets expire from 2006 through 2010.

So, doing the math, after the problem was found and reported, our state travelers lost more than twice as much taxpayer money in roughly half the time.

That's not a good — or acceptable — trend.

Clearly, more oversight is needed within state government regarding airline ticket usage.

In light of the 2010 report, showing more than a quarter million dollars wasted, a reasonable person would have expected to see the amount of lost money to have dropped. You would think it would have been a budget hot button.

Obviously, that didn't happen, and the Office of State Travel should be held accountable for explaining not only why the problem got worse, but how they will prevent future waste.

To be fair, we will acknowledge airlines don't always make it easy to use tickets before they expire. There are instances where travelers cannot take advantage of partly-used airline tickets.

Airlines often charge change fees that can be several hundred dollars to change the person or date associated with the airfare, and they don't make the process particularly easy or user-friendly.

Even with the change fee, however, in most cases the total cost of modifying an unused ticket before it expires should be less expensive than purchasing a new ticket.

When it comes to saving taxpayer dollars, we think it is worth the extra effort.

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