

Our Views: Fund inspector general's work against waste

Is there a better case of “penny wise, pound foolish” than saving money by cutting the budget of one of the agencies that is a watchdog over public corruption?

The argument, heard over several years in the Legislature, is that the state does not need an Inspector General's Office because those investigators' work may overlap with those of the larger Legislative Auditor's Office.

At one time, the House Appropriations Committee actually cut the small appropriation for the inspector general's operation, about \$2 million a year. The budget ultimately was restored by the House.

This year, appropriators once more cut the inspector general's budget out of House Bill 1. It was part of a 55-page amendment reworking the bill, offered by Rep. Cameron Henry, R-Metairie, chairman of the Appropriations Committee.

That should not stand.

Is there too much overlap in what the two agencies do? We don't think so, at least in theory. The inspector general is intended to be an entirely independent investigator of potential malfeasance in any level of government, with its findings reported directly to the governor for action.

The Legislative Auditor's Office also does investigations, although typically, its agenda includes more comprehensive looks at an agency. Its reports are much more typically the “paper trail” that could, of course, expose wrongdoing as well as waste. Louisiana State Police also have manifold other duties, and their head is a direct appointee of the governor, hardly politically as independent as the inspector general. An office like that of Inspector General Stephen Street is not going to please everybody, particularly local officials whose actions, or those of their employees, are reported to the inspector general for investigation.

They also can be criticized by those who don't feel they are hard enough on officialdom: We recently have been critical of the inspector general's report into the ongoing saga of Burl Cain, former Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola warden. If there are some overlapping responsibilities, that is why it is important that the inspector general and Legislative Auditor Daryl Purpera have a good working relationship with each other, as well as with law enforcement with whom both could cooperate in a criminal matter.

To cut the inspector general's budget seems a classic case of saving some pennies but costing the taxpayer more in the long run because the tips the investigators receive may result in an investigation that can save a lot more money than the annual cost of the office.

We agree with Gov. John Bel Edwards, who told the Press Club of Baton Rouge that the savings from cutting spending on the office would not offset the hit on public confidence if the state is paying for the watchdogs over the public's money.

Penny wise, pound foolish.

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