

Protect the Inspector General's Office

Published: Wednesday, May 18, 2016 at 6:01 a.m.

Louisiana Inspector General Stephen Street is right to question the motives of those who would deprive our state of his office.

The shameful fact is that for far too long, politicians have victimized Louisiana taxpayers for their own good. And the Inspector General's Office is one small tool the people have against corruption.

Street had to watch as lawmakers mounted an effort to do away with his office. The fact that they ultimately failed is only mild consolation since the effort itself speaks volumes about how open some of Louisiana's public officials are to getting rid of this vital watchdog agency.

To make matters worse, this year was the second time that lawmakers have essentially tried to shutter the office.

Members of the state House of Representatives passed a budget in 2012, Street said, that would have meant an end to his office. That year, too, cooler heads prevailed, and the money was restored.

There is no guarantee, though, that future attempts will end as well as those did.

"If you do your job right, there are folks who will come after you and it's going to happen regularly," Street said earlier this week.

He used an appearance before the Press Club of Baton Rouge to argue for a dedicated stream of money that would pay for the office without being at the mercy of the Legislature and the governor each year for its continued existence.

In general, dedicated money is a notion that has taken away most of the state government's flexibility in dealing with lean economic times — such as the state is experiencing at the moment. But for this office, with its budget of less than \$1 million a year and such an important task to do, dedicating its budget would be a good idea.

The lawmakers who targeted it this year used several flawed arguments to back their effort.

They said the Inspector General's Office's duties overlap with the State Police, the Attorney General's Office and the legislative auditor.

In a few limited cases, that might be so. In those cases, the various agencies can cooperate and assign each case to the best agency.

They also argued that the inspector general is beholden to the governor because the governor appoints him or her. But the inspector general serves a six-year term, making it difficult for any governor to hold much sway over the independent office.

The person the governor nominates, too, must be confirmed by the House and Senate. So there is little reason to fear any holder of the office will be overly attached to the governor at any given time.

Having an inspector general is a great way to instill confidence in the people and institutions that serve the public. Removing the office would have the exact opposite effect, and Louisiana doesn't need to lose any more confidence in its public officials.

Editorials represent the opinion of the newspaper, not of any individual.

Copyright © 2016 HoumaToday.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.