

Kill effort to end Inspector General's Office

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State lawmakers are considering doing away with the Inspector General's Office.

The move could save Louisiana as much as \$792,193 in annual expenses. But the damage it would do is incalculable.

Inspector General Stephen Street, who has held the job since 2008, said this week that his office has received about \$8.9 million from the state in the past five years. In that same time, the office has pointed out \$33 million in wasted public money.

That is a nearly 4-to-1 ratio of money spent to money that could be saved.

So obviously there is no budgetary argument to ending the office.

What could the political motivations for this move be? It is nearly impossible to say, but the political fallout will be just as, if not more, damaging as the monetary damage.

The office was created by former Gov. Buddy Roemer and was written into state law under former Gov. Bobby Jindal. Both those efforts were aimed at winning back some ethical credibility for a state political system that has squandered so much of it over the years.

Doing away with the office would have the exact opposite impact. It would essentially say that Louisiana is just not interested in rooting out wrongdoing or corruption.

At least one good government watchdog group has come out firmly against the legislative effort, arguing that the attempt itself is proof that the office is needed.

"The stronger the effort to try to eliminate this investigator, probably the better the evidence that the investigator is doing something worthwhile," said Robert Travis Scott, president of the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana. "If it's ruffling feathers, it will become a target."

That is an excellent way to sum up the lawmakers' attempt. The problem is that Louisiana has feathers that need ruffling, and depending on elected officials such as the attorney general to do it doesn't always make sense.

"There are cases that come with guaranteed blowback that elected officials will shy away from," Street said.

Some lawmakers have argued that the Inspector General's Office has duties that overlap with those of the attorney general or State Police. That might be true in some limited areas, but the small cost of the office compared to the enormous public credibility it gives state government makes it an excellent deal for taxpayers.

Others have argued that because the governor nominates the inspector general, the office has little independence.

That is nonsense. The inspector general is nominated by the governor, but the nominee must be approved by the House and the Senate. And the inspector general serves a six-year term, meaning that the term will likely cross over into another governor's term.

Even if there were legitimate political and budgetary reasons for doing away with the office — and there are not — its existence is valuable because it can give Louisiana taxpayers an assurance that someone is looking out for their interests.

The House, which was scheduled to debate the proposal today, should kill this terrible plan at once.

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