

Inspector general financing restored in next year's budget

By MELINDA DESLATTE - Associated Press - Thursday, May 12, 2016

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) - An effort to eliminate the Louisiana inspector general's office failed to win House support Thursday, amid concerns about scrapping a government watchdog agency in a state with a history of public corruption problems.

The inspector general investigates fraud and waste in government.

Lawmakers in the House rejected a proposal from its Appropriations Committee to eliminate all financing for the inspector general in the budget year that begins July 1.

About \$1.7 million for the inspector general was restored to the budget proposal without objection. Rep. Franklin Foil, R-Baton Rouge, pushed the restoration, saying that would provide about 80 percent of the office's current level of financing.

Foil said the agency's ongoing investigations shouldn't be disrupted. He said that although some lawmakers may have "issues" with Inspector General Stephen Street and how he's done his job, "it would be somewhat reckless to just not fund the department at all."

Some lawmakers suggested the agency's duties overlap with work done by the attorney general and legislative auditor.

"How many investigative groups do we need in the state?" asked Rep. Kenny Havard, R-Jackson.

But others worried about the public perception of eliminating the agency.

"If we stand for good government, as we claim to, this isn't even a question," said Rep. Julie Stokes, R-Kenner.

Rep. John Schroder, R-Covington, referenced ongoing public corruption cases in his home of St. Tammany Parish as he urged keeping the inspector general's office open.

"Unfortunately, I come from a parish where we've had several elected officials who have been or will be going to jail, and I have gotten a large amount of emails wondering what we are doing. Whether I agree or not, the public perception is everything," Schroder said. "It would be a mistake in my opinion to get rid of this office."

During committee debate, Street defended his performance, saying his agency's cases have generated money for state coffers, including several investigations into fraud in Louisiana's film tax credit program. He said his agency investigates politically tricky cases that other agencies and elected officials don't want to touch.

The inspector general is appointed by the governor to serve a six-year term. Street has held the job since 2008, appointed twice by former Gov. Bobby Jindal and confirmed by the Senate. He can only be removed early if a majority of the House and Senate agree.

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