

# Grand Isle ‘police’ criticized

- By [MICHELLE MILLHOLLON](#)
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The Grand Isle Port Commission handed out badges to armed individuals and proclaimed them harbor police officers without commissioning them, a state report said Wednesday.

The report alleges the arrangement may have violated state law against impersonating law enforcement officers.

The 13-officer harbor police department recently suspended operations. The department policed boaters in and around the island.

The problems cited by the state Inspector General’s Office include possible felonies, insufficient insurance coverage, inadequately trained officers and a police chief who was arrested for wielding a machete after a car accident.

“These individuals were observed in public openly carrying firearms and displaying ‘harbor police’ badges,” the office noted in a report released Wednesday.

At issue is whether some of those individuals falsely impersonated a peace officer because they were not properly commissioned to carry out law enforcement. The violation is a felony punishable by up to two years behind bars.

The Inspector General’s Office found “no oaths of office, commissions, reserve officer applications, evidence of background investigations, drug screens, criminal history checks or other measures.”

The office conducted a criminal background check on the police force and found two arrests involving separate officers — the machete incident as well as a drug bust.

The report questions whether the harbor police force is even needed.

Inspector General Stephen Street Jr. informed Gov. Bobby Jindal in a Jan. 15 letter that the Jefferson Parish barrier island town already receives public safety services from State Police, the state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, the U.S. Coast Guard, the Grand Isle Police Department and the Grand Isle Fire Department.

Also, the Inspector General’s Office said, “the Harbor Police department was staffed entirely by Grand Isle Firemen and Grand Isle Police Officers, therefore adding no additional manpower or capabilities.”

However, Wayne Keller, executive director of the Grand Isle Port Commission as well as the harbor police department's police chief, said he is trying to resolve a number of issues so the department can reform.

"We're going to do everything in our power to get back," he said.

Keller said the Inspector General's Office falsely characterized the police department as officers running amok. The department was a volunteer organization that operated during emergencies and boating events, he said.

Someone needs to be on the water to ensure that boats are operating safely and that they are not going through swimming areas, Keller said.

Keller acknowledged that he was arrested in Ohio 18 years ago for pulling a machete out of his car after a traffic accident.

"That was totally a self-defense issue," he said.

Keller said one of the occupants of the other car involved in the accident ran at him. He said he happened to have a machete in his car and he picked it up because he was fearful.

He said the Inspector General's Office put him in a bad light with the port commission by resurrecting the incident.

The commission created the harbor police in 2007, referencing a state law that gave the group the power "to &hellip provide light, water, police protection and other services."

The Inspector General's Office contends the port commission supplanted the legal requirements for creating a police department.

The harbor police force used a boat once owned by the state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries and a 1999 Ford Crown Victoria.

The port commission contends it did have the legislative authority to create a police department. However, the organization suspended the police force pending an opinion from the state Attorney General's Office.

The Inspector General's Office said other issues still remain, notably whether there is proper insurance to cover the police department's liability.

Keller said that is a paramount issue that will probably result in a slimmer police force.

"We've got major insurance and funding issues," he said.

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