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BY MICHELLE MILLHOLLON

Capitol news bureau

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Days after scuttling funding for the state Inspector General's Office, state Rep. Joe Harrison said Thursday that he disagreed with the office's probe of allegations that former state Fire Marshal Butch Browning misused his authority.

“(They) used a lot of misinformation and destroyed a man’s reputation,” Harrison said of Browning, who has submitted his intent to retire and is

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no longer on the job.

The office's investigation of Browning still is unfinished amid State Police's announcement that a letter he reportedly wrote to the governor admitting wrongdoing was a forgery.

But Harrison, R-Napoleonville, said he moved to strip \$1.7 million in funding for the office from the proposed state spending plan not because of the Browning investigation but because the office is redundant and is straying from its original mission.

State Inspector General Stephen Street responded to the criticism by referring to a friendly warning he said he got upon becoming the state's watchdog.

"I was told if you do this (job) right, you'll eventually have people trying to shut you down," Street said.

He said he has done nothing to discredit Browning other than to receive a complaint about the way the former state fire marshal did his job. "You won't find a single television interview, not a single statement by me that says anything negative about Butch Browning," Street said.

He added that his office is expediting the Browning investigation to bring the matter to a quick but accurate resolution.

The House Appropriations Committee voted 11-4 Tuesday in favor of an amendment by Harrison to eliminate funding for Street's office from House Bill 1, the proposed \$25 billion state operating budget for the fiscal year that starts July 1.

Rafael Goyeneche III, managing director and president of the statewide Metropolitan Crime Commission, characterized Harrison's amendment as a political stunt that illustrates the need for Street's office.

"If the Inspector General's Office is making friends, then it probably isn't doing a good job," he said.

Harrison said he started looking at the issue two years ago, long before the Browning investigation began. He said he will offer another amendment next week on the House floor to redirect the \$1.7 million for Street's office to paying for community services for the developmentally disabled.

He said there is no need for the Inspector General's Office to exist when State Police, the state Attorney General's Office and the Legislative Auditor's Office already investigate allegations of wrongdoing.

Harrison said Street's office has morphed from following paper trails into conducting poorly managed police investigations into people like Browning.

"No good investigator would ever bring this to the point it got to

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without verifying any information,” Harrison said, adding that Browning lacks the financial resources to defend his reputation.

Street said his office became a law enforcement agency under legislation that got a favorable vote from Harrison.

Now the Jindal administration is wading into the dispute in an effort to keep Street’s office intact.

Gov. Bobby Jindal said in a prepared statement that he will work with members of the Legislature to restore the funding for the Inspector General’s Office. “In our first year, we passed a law to make the Inspector General role permanent. We’re committed to giving the people of Louisiana a strong Inspector General’s office,” the governor said.

Then-Gov. Buddy Roemer created the post in 1988 to ferret out fraud and abuse in state and local government. He named Bill Lynch, a longtime investigative reporter, to the job.

Subsequent governors kept Lynch on the job but diminished his staff and limited his role.

After Lynch died in 2004, Gov. Kathleen Blanco was slow to replace him. She finally appointed Sharon B. Robinson, a numbers-cruncher who had spent her entire career in state government.

Jindal successfully sought to make the office permanent when he became governor in 2008.

He hired Street, a lawyer whose ré sumé includes work for the state Attorney General’s Office and the East Baton Rouge Parish public defender’s office.

In the fiscal year that ended June 30, Street received a budget of \$1.7 million and reported uncovering more than \$3.2 million in fraud.

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