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Feds may pitch in to help Cerasoli

Wednesday, May 14, 2008

Recovery czar asks inspectors general

By Bruce Alpert

WASHINGTON -- Federal Gulf Coast Rebuilding Coordinator Douglas O'Dell is asking federal inspectors general to help New Orleans Inspector General Robert Cerasoli get the staff he needs to run his office.

"He has some challenges getting properly credentialed and trained staff in place, as well as the equipment to conduct his work," O'Dell said Tuesday. "And we want to be helpful."

O'Dell said he doesn't have a "specific number in mind," but is hopeful that the federal inspectors general will make some personnel available to Cerasoli. "We will do so free of charge to the city," he said.

Cerasoli said he hasn't "gotten any specific commitments" but he would welcome the help.

Cerasoli said he's been making some good hires, but that it has been difficult to find people certified with the accounting, forensic auditing and investigative skills required to do the work required of his newly created office.

Kenneth Donohue, inspector general for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, said his office already is working with Cerasoli on issues that jointly impact the city and federal agencies working on Katrina recovery issues.

While Donohue said he didn't think he could spare any staffers from his office, he is reaching out to retired employees who might be able to help the city on a temporary basis.

"In my mind, it doesn't make sense to send people across the street from our offices to Bob Cerasoli's office to address the same kind of problems," Donohue said. "But Bob is doing a noble thing and is a very passionate guy. I think he's on the right track."

O'Dell said that in time Cerasoli will find enough people locally trained to do the work.

O'Dell, a retired Marine major general who commanded the New Orleans-based 4th Marine Division, replaced Donald Powell as Gulf Coast Recovery coordinator April 18. He hosted a meeting Monday with Cerasoli and inspectors general from 11 federal agencies.

So far, Cerasoli has managed to fill only three of 37 positions budgeted in his office, according to O'Dell. He hopes to have an announcement of federal employees being assigned to New Orleans in a matter of days or weeks, "but not months," he said.

Bruce Alpert can be reached at bruce.alpert@newhouse.com or (202) 383-7861.