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[About Us](#)
[Our Reform Initiatives](#)
[Resources & Collaborations](#)
[Archives](#)
[Contact Us](#)

Media

[Ethics Home](#)
[Highlights](#)
[Resources](#)
[Archives](#)
[History & Status Reports](#)

Inspector general begins work in N.O. with no office, no staff, no car

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By Bruce Egger, Staff writer

New Orleans' first inspector general hit the ground walking Wednesday. Literally walking.

In his first week at work, Robert Cerasoli has no car, no staff, no city office, no city phone and no clear idea of what budget his newly created office will have next year. But he had not expected much more, Cerasoli said. Even when he agreed in June to take the job, he said, "I thought it would be difficult."

Had he expected to find a functioning office so he could get off to a faster start? No, he said, adding that in some ways it's a good thing he'll be able to structure the office the way he wants from the ground up.

"I didn't think this would be a bed of roses," he said.

As inspector general, Cerasoli is charged with investigating waste, fraud and corruption in city government and among those receiving money from the city. He is also expected to propose ways to make local government more efficient and to teach city officials about their ethical responsibilities.

Anticipating that the inspector general's office would get started around midyear, the City Council voted in the fall to allot it \$250,000 for this year. The council later approved a \$157,000 annual salary for Cerasoli, meaning he will receive a little more than \$50,000 for the final four months of the year.

Waiting for a budget

Cerasoli said he won't sign a lease for office space or start hiring auditors and investigators until he is sure what his budget will be for 2008. Before hiring anyone, particularly experienced people from outside New Orleans, he needs to be able to assure them they'll be employed past Dec. 31 and what they'll be paid, he said.

Some council members have discussed giving his office \$1 million or more next year, but others have suggested figures as low as \$500,000.

For now, Loyola University President Kevin Wildes, chairman of the city's Ethics Review Board, is providing Cerasoli a temporary office at the university.

The law creating the inspector general's office says the city will provide "appropriately located office space which shall be in close proximity but off site from City Hall," plus "sufficient and necessary" office equipment, supplies and furnishings.

Cerasoli said he is looking at whether it would be legal and advisable to have his office in space owned or leased by the city, such as in an office building across Poydras Street from City Hall, or whether he wants to use space in a privately controlled building.

His chief concern, he said, is the security of the office and its files, such as subpoenaed documents. "I don't want it compromised in any way," he said. Whatever decision he makes on office space, he said, "will be fiscally responsible."

He also said he's not upset the city hasn't provided him with a phone. He's happy using his own cell phone, mostly for security reasons. "I'm not big on city cell phones," he said.

As for the lack of a car that forced him to walk or hitch rides to various media interviews Wednesday, "I think I'll try to get an automobile from home by the end of the month at my own personal expense," he said. "I'm an IG. Everything I do I won't hit the city for." Cerasoli moved here from the Boston area, where he regularly used public transportation, he said.

Discussions next week

Cerasoli said that during meetings with council members he has detected a lack of enthusiasm for significantly increasing his budget. "That's not endemic to New Orleans," he said. "Appointed and elected officials just don't want to give money to oversight." Cerasoli said he will propose a plan under which the city would dedicate 0.5 percent of its

annual operating budget, or about \$3.8 million, to his office and the ethics board. But he said he knows he may not get that much.

He said he and Wildes are scheduled to meet Monday with an administration official, probably Assistant Chief Administrative Officer Cary Grant, to discuss how the new office will operate and how much money it will need.

Grant will oversee preparation of the 2008 budget that Mayor Ray Nagin will present to the council by Nov. 1. After a month of hearings during which Cerasoli can explain his plans and perhaps make his case for more money, the council will adopt a budget by Nov. 30.

Cerasoli, former inspector general of Massachusetts and co-founder of the national Association of Inspectors General, was chosen by the seven-member Ethics Review Board after a nationwide search that attracted 21 applications.

Years in the making

New Orleans voters in 1995 approved a package of City Charter revisions that mandated creation of the ethics board and authorized an office of inspector general, but neither was implemented until the City Council voted in the fall last year to set them up. The ethics board's members were appointed in December, and it met for the first time early this year.

Besides naming the inspector general, it is charged with enforcing provisions of an ethics code for city employees and contractors.

Cerasoli said he plans to spend the next few weeks "learning the city." He spent a week in New Orleans last month, paying his own airfare and hotel bill, and met with some council members and community leaders. He also attended a meeting of the Municipal Yacht Harbor Corp. board, without identifying himself, to get a feel for how it conducted business. He plans to do the same in coming weeks with other public bodies.

"I'm going to be going to meetings. People may or may not know I'm there," he said. "Knowledge is power."

Former legislator

Cerasoli was inspector general of Massachusetts from 1991 to 2001. Before that, he spent 16 years as a member of the Massachusetts House, where he authored legislation establishing the state's first ethics commission and financial disclosure rules for elected and appointed officials.

For the past several years, he has taught college courses in ethics and financial management and worked on anti-corruption programs in several African nations and elsewhere. He has a master's degree in public administration from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and a bachelor's degree in government and public administration from American University in Washington, D.C.

When he was hired, he said he was "very encouraged" by the terms of the ordinance creating the New Orleans inspector general's office.

The ordinance says the inspector general's office will be "operationally independent" of the council, the Ethics Review Board and the mayor's office, meaning none of them can prevent the office from "initiating, carrying out or completing any audit, investigation or review."

The office is promised "access to all records, information, data, reports, plans, projections, matters, contracts, memoranda, correspondence and any other materials" of all city departments, including the council and the mayor's office. It is authorized to subpoena witnesses and records and to require sworn testimony.

The inspector general is appointed for four years but can be removed "for cause" by a two-thirds vote of the Ethics Review Board, and the entire office can be abolished by a two-thirds vote of the City Council.

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