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Inspector general to hold public meeting tonight

Wednesday, March 5, 2008

Times-Picayune

New Orleans Inspector General Robert Cerasoli will hold a public meeting at 6 p.m. tonight to update residents about the progress of his fledgling office. He will also discuss the results of his efforts in Baton Rouge during the recent special legislative session on ethics.

Cerasoli will speak at the St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church on the corner of St. Charles Avenue and State Street. The meeting is being sponsored by the church, Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans, and Common Good. For more information, contact Hallie White at 504-897-0101 ext. 18.

Read Saturday's Times-Picayune story on Cerasoli's first few months in office:

By Frank Donze and Gordon Russell

For an inspector general still without much staff, still relegated to pitching in the bullpen, Robert Cerasoli is quite the man about town.

Embracing a high-profile persona as he talks up rooting out corruption and inefficiency in New Orleans government, six months after his arrival in the city, the former Massachusetts inspector general is popping up all over.

Making promises. Inviting questions.

Wednesday evening, he could be found at St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, explaining to a rapt audience of about 30 people how a Yankee newly retired and taking care of his ailing mother a year ago wound up New Orleans' first-ever inspector general.

Cerasoli decided to compete for the job in large part because he missed the work. When his mother died in May, he delivered the eulogy, and a woman who attended encouraged him to get back in the game.

"We have to do what we were put on this earth to do, what makes us whole," Cerasoli told the adoring crowd. "When we quit doing what we love, we start to check out, we start to die, more quickly than we already are."

Setting up shop here hasn't been easy, he said, noting he had taken a quick nap before the appearance to make up for a lack of sleep the night before.

"They've been long and arduous days," he said, delivering the word "arduous" in a textbook working-class Boston accent as "aah-joo-iss."

Roadblocks have been almost continual, Cerasoli said. First, he was told his office couldn't have its own attorney; then, there was a battle to get financed. There have been other skirmishes over subpoena power and advertising to fill open positions.

Most recently, state Sen. Derrick Shepherd, D-Marrero, sponsored a bill that would have made Cerasoli and his employees subject to criminal prosecution for making public any information except for a "final report." The effort was defeated.

Members of the church audience gasped at times and chuckled knowingly as Cerasoli regaled them with tales of fighting the good fight in a place where, according to the inspector general, government is more opaque than in many places -- but where citizens are also engaged like nowhere else.

"Sometimes you're up, sometimes you're down," Cerasoli said.

"Right now, I'm up."

Revenue 'stuff' one target

Having filled only two of the more than two dozen slots on his staff to date, Cerasoli said in an interview he's not yet ready to speak in detail about which areas of city government he intends to target early on for investigation.

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There are two specific areas of interest: At the urging of some City Council members, he said he will take a look at City Hall's take-home vehicle policy; and he plans to examine whether the city's hotels and motels are paying all the municipal taxes they owe.

"The revenue generation stuff will be an important part of what we do," Cerasoli said. "We want to try to recoup some money and do something quick to justify in one swoop the costs associated with the office.

"Beyond that, we're not making any commitments until all our people are here and we have a flavor for the strengths of the individuals on the team."

Cerasoli doesn't mind sharing the spotlight with others well versed in legal muckraking.

On Tuesday, he is scheduled to join U.S. Attorney Jim Letten and James Bernazzani, special agent in charge of the FBI's New Orleans office, in an appearance at the New Orleans Yacht Club. The crime-fighting figures will talk to the Louisiana Technology Council about how they plan to use technology and work together.

Other venues beckon. Later next week, the 60-year-old watchdog will hit the theater stage, allowing one nonprofit to cash in a bit on his marquee status.

A news release sent recently via e-mail by The Cripple Creek Theatre Company hints that Cerasoli will have a starring role in its latest production, "The Inspector General," a satire by Russian playwright Nikolai Gogol.

Stage role denied

The announcement claims that Cerasoli will be "playing the title role during each Thursday night performance" at the Rampart Community Center in the French Quarter.

Cerasoli said Andrew Kingsley, the theater troupe's managing director, is taking "poetic license" by suggesting that he will be part of the play. "The guy's just being cute. He's just trying to get people to show up."

Cerasoli said he agreed to take the stage following next week's premiere -- and after subsequent Thursday night performances through the end of the month -- to field questions about Gogol's play and its relevance to New Orleans.

He also will discuss his ongoing effort to recruit a staff and launch investigations.

Cerasoli has said that Louisiana's history of shady politics played a role in his decision to apply for the New Orleans post. But even the Big Easy's tainted reputation is no match for the lurid story line in Gogol's fictional tale.

A synopsis of "The Inspector General" says the play follows "the unscrupulous mayor of an insular and provincial city" who is surrounded by "crooked and apathetic officials" and determined to prevent disclosure of corrupt acts.

"The police are perpetually drunk, the judge raises fighting cocks in the courthouse, the conditions in the hospital are catastrophic, the teachers are unqualified and the postmaster reads all the mail," the public relations teaser says.

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