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Times-Picayune

Searching for an honest person, or 10

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The Rev. Kevin J. Wildes, SJ

The subject of ethics has been a hot topic in Louisiana over the past 18 months. The New Orleans Ethics Review Board and the city's first inspector general have been in the headlines.

We recently saw a drama unfold with the state's Ethics Board due to the resignation of 10 of its 11 members. In the special session, the Legislature reorganized the Ethics Board by requiring a higher level of financial disclosure for members and their families. The Legislature also gave the authority to hear and decide cases to administrative law judges.

As someone who has spent his professional life working on issues of ethics and public policy, these events have been a feast for me. When I moved to New Orleans four years ago, I never imagined that my work in ethics would be so important to my life here.

With the resignation of so many members of the state's Ethics Board, its nominating committee has plenty of work ahead. In Louisiana, the nominating committee for the state Ethics Board is comprised of the presidents of the state's independent colleges and universities.

As president of Loyola University New Orleans, I serve as chair of the nominating committee. Our task is to nominate at least three people for each vacant position. By Aug. 27, we must submit 30 names to the state. And we will. We are hard at work gathering names and vetting them, so that we can send to the governor and the Legislature not only the required number of nominees, but good, strong candidates for this vital board.

This is a lot of work to do in a short amount of time. But it is worth doing. While one should do the right thing because it is the right thing, there are many other good reasons for us to act.

As with the city's ethics review board and the office of the inspector general, having a good state Ethics Board is important to building confidence that government will act efficiently and effectively.

While these organizations will certainly deal with and address instances of corruption, the long-term purpose is to put in place systems and oversight that help prevent corruption from taking place.

New Orleans Inspector General Robert Cerasoli has often said that when governments are inefficient and ineffective, they sow the seeds of corruption. People get frustrated dealing with the government, and so they look for ways to buy their way around its inefficiency and ineffectiveness.

Those who are most hurt when governments don't work well are the poor and disadvantaged. They need government services, but are unable to buy their way around government obstacles. Such circumstances are not conducive to economic development.

On a national level, the issue of ethics is especially important to our state's long-term economic health. Without a solid structure of ethics policies in place, businesses and entrepreneurs will bypass Louisiana and look for other states and cities where governments are more efficient and effective, and they don't have to buy their way around them.

Major Gen. Doug O'Dell, coordinator of federal support for recovery and rebuilding of the Gulf Coast, understands the importance of ethics in government for this region's long-term recovery and has been a strong supporter of our efforts.

The work to establish good, effective ethics structures is the foundation for building a new New Orleans and a new Louisiana. If done right, these structures will help make government more efficient and effective in doing its job. Such improvement will serve all the citizens of the city and state, especially the least advantaged and the voiceless. Such improvement will create an attractive climate for businesses and economic development. This effort, as we know from the city's ethics review board, has to be done carefully and correctly.

Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans: Searching for an honest person

Many people want everything done yesterday. But this is a major cultural shift, and we are undoing years of business as usual.

We are setting up structures for the future, and we are recruiting people who can help lead and implement these changes. We have a chance to get it right. Shame on us if we fail.

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