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American Press

Editorial: Inspector General's office too valuable to eliminate

May 15, 2012

Is it a bargain to spend \$1 to root out nearly \$2 in fraud in Louisiana?

Apparently, some members of the state Legislature don't think so.

The House rejected an amendment to the state budget that would have restored funding for the state Inspector General's Office.

Absent either a move in the state Senate to restore the funding or pressure by Gov. Bobby Jindal to do so, the IG's office,

established in 1988, will be abolished.

The Bureau of Government Research said the \$1.7 million cost to run the IG's office is a "drop in a \$25 billion bucket."

The nonpartisan Public Affairs Research Council was even more biting.

"A sudden halt in funding of the inspector general would terminate ongoing investigators and send a message nationwide that

Louisiana government is open for corrupt and wasteful business," said PAR.

State Rep. Joe Harrison, R-Napoleonville, has led the campaign to cut off the funding. He admitted that he did not agree with

the IG Office's recent investigation of state Fire Marshal Butch Browning. Browning abruptly announced last month that he

as going to retire, then was reinstated after the probe found no wrongdoing.

Harrison said there should have been no investigation in the first place. State Inspector General Stephen Street said his

office had received a complaint about how Browning was doing his job and launched an investigation.

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

Harrison said the IG office is redundant and its duties can be handled by State Police and the Attorney General's Office.

We wholeheartedly disagree. With its ranks thinned over the past three years, State Police has its plate full handling oversight

of the state's casinos and truck stops. And the attorney general in Louisiana is too much of a political species to launch

investigations into wrongdoing by other politicians or political agencies.

In the last fiscal year that ended June 30, 2011, Street's office was credited with uncovering \$3.2 million in fraud. But

that's seemingly wasted on members of the state House.

Shamefully, only one member of the

Southwest Louisiana delegation to the House, state Rep. Mike Danahay,

D-Sulphur, voted

for an amendment that would restore funding for the IG's office.

State Reps. A.B. Franklin, D-Lake Charles, Johnny Guinn,

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R-Jennings, Bob Hensgens, R-Abbeville, Dorothy Sue Hill, D-Dry Creek, and Frankie Howard, R-Many, voted against the amendment. State Reps. Brett Geymann, R-Moss Bluff, and James Armes, D-Leesville, were recorded as absent.

Curiously, Speaker of the House Chuck

Kleckley, R-Lake Charles, also opposed the amendment. Either Kleckley missed a memo

on the matter from Jindal, or the governor is only paying lip service to supporting the IG's office and is, in fact, maneuvering behind the curtain to scuttle it.

There's still hope the office can survive if Jindal means what he's on record as saying: "We're committed to giving the people of Louisiana a strong Inspector General's Office."

And the Senate could add the funding back into the budget that was eliminated by the House.

We hope the Southwest Louisiana state Sens. Ronnie Johns, R-Sulphur, and Dan "Blade" Morrish, R-Jennings, will spearhead the effort.

An office that ferrets out nearly \$2 in fraud for every \$1 it costs is too valuable to Louisiana to eliminate.

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This editorial was written by a member of the American Press Editorial Board. Its content reflects the collaborative opinion of the Board, whose members include **Bobby Dower**, **Ken Stickney**,

Jim Beam, **Dennis Spears**, **Crystal Stevenson** and **Donna Price**.

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