



OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL JEFFERSON PARISH

KIM RAINES CHATELAIN
INSPECTOR GENERAL



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(SECOND) OPEN LETTER

Erosion of Oversight in Jefferson Parish

To the citizens of Jefferson Parish:

Since my appointment in March 2022, I have published 12 work products with little response from Councilmembers.

In September 2024, I published a public letter to Councilmembers raising concerns about \$10.3 million in public funds being spent on a brewpub project. In response, five Councilmembers are introducing legislation to permanently prohibit the Office of Inspector General (OIG) from speaking to you, the citizens. Instead of engaging in meaningful discussion about corrective action, Councilmembers are, once again, working to dismantle independent oversight.

In December 2019, the Inspector General published the (First) Open Letter to citizens warning, “[w]ithin the culture of our Parish government there exists, among some, an underlying tenor or resentment toward oversight and independent review.” [Read 2019 Open Letter](#). Broad, sweeping, and hastily passed amendments to the Inspector General ordinance in December 2019 was the first retaliatory assault by Councilmembers. Those amendments permanently weakened the office’s independence.

Five years later, the independence of the OIG is under attack once more. While the faces of Councilmembers have changed, the tenor of resentment against independent oversight persists. Inspectors General from coast to coast, north to south, have spoken out against these proposed Jefferson Parish amendments saying:

The Proposed Amendment represents government at its worst – it seeks to cancel the watchdog’s public reveal of their findings, effectively immunizing public officials from scrutiny of their constituents. Such circumstances breed suspicion, fraud and corruption. The Parish Council must do better. ~ Denise S. Wolf, Esq. Inspector General, Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority.

I am a licensed attorney, currently serving as the Inspector General of the Chicago Housing Authority, as well as the President of the Illinois Chapter of the Association of Inspectors General. I previously worked in the legal department of the City of Chicago OIG for nearly 10 years. In my entire career in this field, I have never seen a similar legislative provision attempting to limit the specific statements of an IG. The amendment would make Jefferson Parish an outlier in this area and

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reflect a clear effort to weaken its own government oversight. ~ Kathryn Richards, Inspector General, Chicago Housing Authority.

I am writing to urge you to reject the proposed amendments to the Ordinance for the Jefferson Parish Office of Inspector General (OIG). A critical role for an oversight agency involves communicating findings to and with the public... Creating barriers to transparency and communication directly impacts the public's perception and knowledge of the integrity (or lack thereof) with which the government operates. ~ Sue Stengel, Inspector General, Los Angeles Unified School District, CA.

The proposed amendments to the ordinance by the Jefferson Parish Council restricts the Inspector general in the very essence of her duties by prohibiting her from communicating with the public... The beginning of a corrupt regime starts with the prohibition of denunciation which goes against the First Amendment. ~ Brigitte Bishop, Former Inspector General for the City of Montreal.

More concerning is that the amendments limit the public's right to a transparent and accountable government, which are key to maintaining public trust in democracy. ~ Claudette Biemeret, Inspector General, BART Office of Inspector General, Oakland, CA.

I strongly urge you to reconsider this proposal... It would negatively impact the Office of Inspector General in its ability to conduct efficient and independent operations. ~ John Carey, Inspector General, Palm Beach County, FL.

Transparency work cannot be done in secret, and accountability means very little if no one knows about it... I am firmly of the view that an Office of Inspector General whose ability to communicate thoughtfully and appropriately with the public is curtailed is one whose effectiveness has been critically undermined. ~ Deborah Witzburg, Inspector General City of Chicago, IL.

You have pending before you proposed language regarding the Jefferson Parish Inspector General's communication with the public. I write because the proposed language is at odds with the core principles of an Inspector General's Office as articulated by the Association of Inspector's General and the models followed across the country.... It is central to the efficacy of such work that Inspectors General communicate their findings to the public to ensure transparency and confidence in government. ~ Jeffrey S. Shapiro, Esq. CIG, Inspector General, Commonwealth of MA.

After reviewing the proposed changes to the ordinance, I personally believe it would significantly hamper the independence of the OIG and its ability to fully serve the people of your parish. ~ Kristofer B. Sullivan, CIG, CIA, CFE, CISA.

Present Threat to Independent Oversight

Five Parish Councilmembers have joined to sponsor legislation to silence the OIG. They have proposed amendments to the Inspector General ordinance which, if adopted, would:

- Prohibit the OIG from making public statement made outside of a ***courtroom***, “extrajudicial statement,” which is to prohibit ***all*** public statements since the OIG does not make statements inside a courtroom.
- Prohibit the Inspector General from making any public comment that could lead to public condemnation of any individual or entity under investigation ***or*** included in a report, which, if adopted, would constrain the Inspector General’s authority to question acts of any elected officials, as mere questioning could result in public criticism.
- Critically damage the Inspector General’s ability to recruit new employees.

These sweeping provisions will threaten the Inspector General’s authority to:

- Publish reports without interference or threat of reprisal.
- Provide the public with updates on ongoing audits and evaluations.
- Respond to inquiries about its published work products.
- Communicate with the public about published work products.
- Communicate with appropriate authorities about potential violations of law.

Public Reports and Public Engagement Are Core to Our Mission

The Office of Inspector General’s mission is to provide **increased accountability and oversight of Parish government**. Public engagement is fundamental to achieving this mission. This mission is realized through published work and public outreach. Our published work products inform the citizens about the efficiency, effectiveness, and integrity of government operations. This empowers citizens with information to hold government officials accountable. Our public outreach, whether it be through public presentations, social media, or media engagement, ensures that Inspector General findings and recommendations are widely accessible to the public, serving as a force multiplier to encourage transparency and accountability. We make public statements at:

- **Ethics and Compliance Commission meetings**, providing updates on audits and evaluations, sharing reports and findings, and communicating challenges facing the office.
- **Civic and professional organizations**, sharing reports and findings.
- **Media inquiries**, ensuring accurate and timely information reaches the public.

Parish Councilmembers, through the proposed language, are trying to prevent the Inspector General’s office from informing the public about how government and its elected officials are performing and how the Parish Council spends taxpayer monies. Public statements by the Inspector General’s office are rooted in OIG’s published work products which are supported by verified facts. Councilmembers’ efforts to silence the Inspector General destroys the value of oversight by quashing the public’s access to important information about their Parish government.

A Discriminatory Employment Restriction

In addition to limiting public communication, the proposed amendments include an unprecedented provision prohibiting employees of the Office of Inspector General from working in Parish government for five years after their service. This amendment unfairly targets Office of Inspector General employees and will exacerbate the challenges of recruiting and retaining highly qualified staff. It is worth noting that at least two former employees—including the current Director of Accounting—have gone on to serve the Parish after serving the Office of Inspector General.

The Office of Inspector General is fortunate to attract dedicated public servants who are highly educated and qualified. These individuals face significant challenges, including ongoing hostility from Parish officials toward oversight. This punitive amendment sends a demoralizing message to those who have or may choose to commit themselves to the mission of the OIG work.

Let Us Not Forget – We Had Model Legislation

Let us not forget that the demand for independent oversight in Jefferson Parish came upon the heels of the resignation of the Parish President, Parish Attorney, and Chief Operating Officer and ensuing trials of corruption. These events triggered the formation of an Advisory Committee to study the establishment of an office of inspector general. After months of study, the Advisory Committee overwhelmingly recommended the establishment of an office with “the broadest authority possible to investigate possible ethical and/or legal violations committed by Parish public servants.” They urged the Parish to “provide the Parish’s Office of Inspector General with the powers needed to investigate any possible occasions of malfeasance, corruption or ethical violations by governmental officials or employees, and would also provide that office with the tools needed to uncover and expose incidents of waste and inefficiency in governmental operations.”

Following these recommendations, the OIG was created using **national model legislation** with a proven ability to ensure robust, independent oversight. Over time, however, the Parish Councilmembers have steadily eroded this authority, **undermining the very oversight that citizens fund, support, and deserve.**

Councilmembers pose the greatest threat to the viability and sustainability of independent oversight in Jefferson Parish. They have a demonstrated history of seizing upon any justification, real or imagined, to suppress the OIG. Because these Councilmembers are both subject to the OIG and empowered to amend the Inspector General ordinance, they are forever conflicted by the temptation to place personal disdain for the OIG over the public’s demand for independent oversight.

Conclusion

The citizens of Jefferson Parish deserve a government that values transparency, accountability, and integrity. They deserve Councilmembers committed to supporting and sustaining independent oversight. The proposed amendments threaten independent oversight. Councilmembers supporting independent oversight will reject these amendments. Concluding with sentiments from the (First) Open Letter of December 2019:

The unchecked opposition to oversight must not be tolerated. Make no mistake the efforts underway are designed to strike at the heart of the Inspector General’s independence and are irreconcilable with the spirit of the laws and the will of the people!

Yours sincerely,



Kim Raines Chatelain