

The Hummel Report: Do We Need an Inspector General?



Figuring out a way to close an annual budget deficit has become a familiar challenge at the Rhode Island State House. This year's \$9.2 billion budget — a 30% increase over what the state was spending just a decade ago — relies on the governor coming up with \$25 million of yet-to-be specified cuts and the legislature scooping millions of dollars in reserves from agencies like The Narragansett Bay Commission.

But what if there was more money available without having to raise taxes or fees or use other financial gimmicks? Ray Berberick of Portsmouth has a suggestion: Create an office of the inspector general.

It's a pitch that he gave to Governor Lincoln Chafee five years ago when Berberick and others were fighting a proposal to toll vehicles on the Sakonnet River Bridge. Politicians, trying to close yet another budget gap, asked the opponents: In lieu of tolls, where would you find the money? "[An inspector general] will find scores of millions of dollars in funds that are spent incorrectly," said Berberick, a retired lieutenant colonel who served for two years as an inspector general when he was stationed with the US Army at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma, in the mid-1990s. He was trained before taking over the position.



"During the training I thought, 'My God, if only half the people in the world knew the concepts of what the inspector general can bring to the table to make things more efficient and effective.' Then there would be a lot less, not fraud waste and abuse from criminal intent, but just streamlined procedures [that would] save everybody time," Berberick said.

Berberick and other proponents envision an inspector general, whose duties lie somewhere between the state's auditor general and the Rhode Island attorney general, with a focused mission of looking for waste, fraud and abuse. And if the IG comes across potential criminal activity, he or she would immediately refer it to the attorney general.

Massachusetts was the first in the country to create the position 35 years ago and is one of 12 US states

to have an IG. And Florida has taken it one step further, as 26 agencies have individual inspectors general across the spectrum of state government.

In Rhode Island, an inspector general bill has been filed each session for nearly two decades, including two on the House side and two on the Senate side in 2017. But they've gone nowhere. Berberick testified in May before the House Finance Committee along with the lead sponsor of one of the bills, Rep. Robert Lancia, a Cranston Republican, who points to the savings right next door. "Ultimately, the pros outweigh the cons," Lancia said. "I think we've seen Massachusetts and other states, where hundreds of millions of dollars have been saved."

House Speaker Nicholas Mattiello told us he is still studying the issue. Senate President Dominick Ruggiero was non-committal, and Governor Raimondo said she is, "open to examining this concept more closely."



Berberick said a Rhode Island inspector general could start with something as simple as looking at the state fleet of cars, as he did when he was in Oklahoma. "We found out there were a lot of extra military vehicles that were being licensed and insured, but not used. And we saved the post a couple of hundred thousand dollars."

Berberick is already looking to the 2018 session. He created a website, Facebook page and Twitter account. And he's determined to convince those in leadership this could help them in the long run. "It will help protect the governor, it will help protect the five elected senior officers of the state. Give it a shot for five or 10 or 15 years. If it doesn't work, can it? And I think everybody would be pleasantly surprised. And the leadership that has the courage to put this in place will be heroes."

The Hummel Report is a 501 3C non-profit organization that relies, in part, on your donations. If you have a story idea or want make a donation, go to www.HummelReport.org, where you can also see the video version of this story. You can mail Jim directly at Jim@HummelReport.org.