

# Spot-Checker for Bad Apples

"Who will guard the guardians?" asked the Roman philosopher Cicero more than 2,000 years ago. In 1998 the Montgomery County Council came up with a decisive answer: an independent inspector general (IG). That year the council overrode a veto by County Executive Douglas M. Duncan and, after a national search, selected Norman Butts, a lawyer and auditor, as the county's first IG. In 2001 it reappointed Butts to a four-year term.

Butts, who works independently of the council and the executive, has proven effective in guarding the guardians by ferreting out fraud, waste and abuse in county government. His work on the abuse of county credit cards, for example, led to much-needed reform and was an important factor in the departure of three top executive branch officials—the directors of fleet management, liquor control and pension investments.

His report on the Department of Liquor Control showed that the background checks for sensitive positions were inadequate. As a result, a department director was conducting business in the tens of millions of dollars while owing thousands in federal and state taxes.

Further, the IG soon will complete the first independent performance audit of the county's retirement plans, which have \$2 billion in assets. Pension scandals involving Maryland and Fairfax County have shown the danger of

inadequate oversight of such plans.

The IG also has found uncollected county revenue in solid-waste services, inadequate reimbursements from employees who have take-home car privileges and large potential savings in school transportation. Butts blew the whistle on county tuition assistance abuses, which again brought about needed reforms.

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Yet at a time when local governments need to be watching every penny, the county's chief administrative officer, Bruce Romer, proposes to abolish the IG position and establish an "accountability office" under his control.

The IG already is accountable, however, and not just to any one administrative official. Instead, the IG answers to taxpayers. That's why organizations such as the NAACP, Common Cause, the Montgomery County Civic Federation and the Montgomery County Taxpayers League want to keep an independent IG. Letters to the council on this subject are almost unanimously in favor of retaining the position too.

Montgomery has a \$3 billion budget and 32,000 employees. The IG's four-person office has a modest budget of \$524,000. Romer says his proposal should be adopted as a money-saver, but the IG's office is the only agency being considered for elimination because of cost.

When government budgets are stretched thin, we all have to do more with less. But the IG is critical to Montgomery County. He's an independent voice, upon whom citizens and county employees alike can call in confidence, and his work is a constant reminder to county government that shenanigans such as those he has uncovered are unacceptable.

Montgomery County has an admirable history of good government. However, any \$3 billion enterprise will have some bad apples, as the IG has demonstrated. It would be a travesty if the council undid its farsighted and hard-fought decision to create the inspector general's job and abolished Montgomery County's only independent fiscal watchdog.

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