

[Detroit Has a New Watch Dog](#)

Category: [News Briefs - Original](#)

Published on Monday, 11 February 2013 08:17

Written by Minehaha Forman

Michigan Chronicle - <http://www.michronicleonline.com/index.php/news-briefs-original/9571-the-inspector-is-in-detroit-s-new-corruption-busting-agency-set-to-open>



As the infamous Kwame Kilpatrick trail draws to a close, an office specially dedicated to uprooting corruption in Detroit city government is set to open.

Detroit's office of inspector general (OIG)—created as part of the 2012 city charter revision— will open to the public next week after years of research, debate and, ultimately, a public vote.

Detroit city council appointed James Heath, former chair of Detroit's board of ethics and assistant state attorney general to the position of inspector general in July.

Since then Heath has been tasked with starting up the independent agency from scratch—finding an office space, hiring staff, and researching best practices.

As the city's first inspector general (IG), Heath holds a powerful charter-mandated mission of ensuring “honesty and integrity in city government by rooting out waste, abuse, fraud, and corruption” according to the recently revised city charter.

Staffed with a team of forensic auditors, investigators, and attorneys, the OIG has the power to investigate any public servant from the mayor all the way down to city employees, contractors and vendors. The IG does not have prosecuting power, but works closely with law enforcement agencies.

One of Heath's jobs as the new inspector in town will be to distinguish his agency from other city agencies designed to do similar work.

"We focus like a laser on fraud, abuse, waste and corruption whereas a general auditor, an ombudsman or board of ethics would have a much broader scope," Heath told MIcronicle.com. "Our forensic auditors and investigators are trained in finding fraud, uncovering fraud and building a case for prosecution."

A lifelong Detroit native and the son of Detroit city workers, Heath, 37, is continuing his family's legacy in Detroit public service.

Heath has a solid background in prosecution, and sniffing out corruption has been one of his career specialties. From his days as a private prosecutor representing the Detroit Police Officer's Association to his most recent post as an assistant attorney general in the criminal division of the Michigan department of attorney general Heath has earned a sterling reputation.

Finances

As with any major change in city government, the creation of the OIG brought a measure of controversy to public debate in recent years.

The question of solvency is one that increasingly plagues the City of Detroit, and not everyone agreed that the city needed an inspector general, saying that the city can't afford to fund another agency—to the tune of more than \$1 million annually— amid a financial crisis.

But supporters of the latest charter revision believe investigating mismanagement could save the city money in the long run.

"When an inspector general's office works well, it, in fact, saves the city money just by virtue of its mission of stopping waste. Corruption is a word but behind that word is city tax dollars going out the door improperly," Heath said.

Critics also argue that the city already has systems in place to investigate complaints of fraud, the auditor general, the law department and the ombudsman's office.

But each of these entities, while all serving a function, don't focus on prosecuting or sanctioning criminal or unethical activity in government, Heath says.

"An auditor general might say, 'some money is missing' and move on. Our folks go in and say, 'Who took that money?' Heath explained. "When they find an irregularity they think may be the result of some sort of fraud, they will turn that complaint over to us and we will investigate in a more pointed fashion."

Although the OIG is just launching for public access, they have already been investigating complaints, some of which have been turned over to law enforcement agencies.

An example of this came in September when the auditor general's office conducted an audit of the city's assessors division and found suspicious irregularities. They referred the case to the inspector general's office for further investigation. The case has since been turned over to the Michigan department of attorney general according to Heath.

Part of what makes the OIG unique is its ability to work directly with law enforcement officials in criminal cases, and the city's human resources department in ethical cases.

The Kilpatrick Factor

Perhaps the one catalyst in the creation of a corruption watchdog agency was the scandal-ridden tenure of former Detroit mayor Kwame Kilpatrick and former city council president Monica Conyers.

Since then the city has been working to rescue its smeared image.

But it's not just Detroit looking to clean up its city government. Detroit joins a growing list of municipalities that are creating inspector general offices not only to weed out government corruption, but also to deter it.

The cities of Chicago, Baltimore, New Orleans, Houston, Albuquerque and Philadelphia are among the municipalities that have opted for an OIG.

"There's a wave of inspector general offices going across the country. Cities are understanding that it's not enough to vocally promote good government. You need independent agencies in place to help root out fraud," Heath said, noting the city of Philadelphia has created such an office in recent years.

Ken Harris, the former charter revision commissioner who championed the creation of an OIG in Detroit, says corruption has been taking place long before Kilpatrick came into office.

"It's what citizens wanted. No more will the pay-to-play schemes of the Kilpatrick scenario play out the way they did. Now those things can be investigated," Harris said.

Heath says that the Kilpatrick debacle is not the only reason for the OIG's creation.

"There are specific instances which led to the establishment of this office, but I think good municipal practice calls for the establishment of this office as well," he said.

Open for Business

As the OIG opens to the public, everyone from residents to elected and appointed officials now have an avenue to report suspicious unethical or illegal activity in city government. The OIG investigates all complaints from bribery and inappropriate relationships to outright theft.

The inspector general's office is located in Cadillac Tower downtown, intentionally off site from the Coleman Young Municipal Center to make it easier for city workers to file a complain anonymously.

"Up until now we've been in what I call it a soft opening state," Heath says. "One of the most important things we've been doing is building our capacity."

The OIG now has five people on staff and Heath looking to add up to five more.

"We anticipate being extremely busy. Our research throughout the country with similarly sized offices seems to indicate that several dozen complaints will be coming in a day—at least initially," Heath said. "To put it in marketing terms, there's a little bit of pent up demand. That's why we are taking our time to make sure we set up the office properly."

One of the criticisms of the city's new inspector general position is that it gives too much power to one appointee.

The IG has the power not only to respond to complaints and build cases for prosecution but also has subpoena power over every city department and agency and can initiate investigations on their own.

But there are controls in place. An IG can be ousted by a 2/3 vote of city council and cannot prosecute, only build cases to turn over to appropriate law enforcement agencies. Limited to a six-year term, once an IG is appointed he or she cannot serve another term or hold any elected office in the city for at least two years. An IG also cannot contribute to any political campaign.

"I've got less than six years left to set this office up in a way that the next man or woman who serves as inspector general will be able to say that inspector Heath and his team laid a foundation for success," Heath says. "And that means putting together a responsible budget, setting up infrastructure of responsive technology-developing protocol and standard operational procedures that are industry standard and excellent examples."

The Detroit Office of Inspector General will announce its complaint hotline, website, address and fax number next week as it launches its public opening. Follow MIchronicle.com for updates.