

# City could save \$1 million by cutting take-home vehicles, inspector general finds



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Mayor Ray Nagin's administration allows too many take-home vehicles, does not keep track of the fleet and could save close to \$1 million by eliminating the expense, the New Orleans inspector general stated in his first report in 16 months on the job.

In the [53-page report](#) delivered Wednesday to Chief Administrative Officer Brenda Hatfield, Inspector General Robert Cerasoli and his staff looked at a sample of 13 city departments.

## Among the problems they found:

- 273 take-home vehicles when the city ordinance allows only 60
- No criteria for assigning vehicles to employees
- No reports on personal use of the vehicles
- Inadequate monitoring of fuel use
- Failure to properly mark city vehicles according to state and local laws

"I'm looking forward to reading the report," Nagin said Wednesday evening. "I've not found that we're totally out of line with other cities."

## Way for city to save

All 273 take-home vehicles are American cars, mostly Fords. The most expensive vehicle in the fleet is a \$44,367 Chevrolet Silverado registered to Thomas Calamari of the Fire Department, according to the report. Nagin himself gets two vehicles -- a 2005 Lincoln Continental and a 2007 Ford Expedition -- with a combined insured value of \$70,542.

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City Council members also get take-home vehicles, all with insured values between \$29,000 and \$30,000.

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Nagin is embroiled in a fight with the City Council about how to fill a \$24 million budget shortfall for 2009. Nagin has said he cannot find any additional cuts and needs to raise taxes.

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"The city would save substantial dollars if take-home vehicles were eliminated," the report states.

Based on Cerasoli's figures, the city could save at least \$928,200 in 2009 if it eliminated all 273 vehicles and \$724,200 by complying with the 60-vehicle limit.

Cerasoli's report estimates the city spends about \$3,100 a year for insurance, fuel and maintenance of each vehicle. The employees and officials with take-home privileges pay a personal use fee of \$1,200, but the city is still out \$1,900 a year for each vehicle, the report found. Eliminating a vehicle entirely would bring a first-year savings of \$3,400, the report states.

Cerasoli said he decided to make the take-home vehicle investigation his first report when the city offered him a car and fuel usage.

"I looked across the street and saw the homeless camp and said, something's not right here," Cerasoli said. The report states that, despite poor record-keeping by the city, Cerasoli's investigators found the 273 take-home vehicles had a total insured value of \$4.1 million.

The city ordinance limits the executive branch to 50 take-home vehicles and the Fire Department to 10. The report found the mayor's office alone has 73 take-home vehicles and the Fire Department gets 22.

Nagin said his administration has made progress limiting take-home vehicles from a high-water mark of 450.

### **Abuse also found**

The report also outlined some instances of abuse or misuse of take-home vehicles. In one case, a coroner's office employee, who happened to coordinate vehicle use for the department, gave his wife a city vehicle to drive to and from her work in Jefferson Parish. The employee was later ordered to repay fuel costs, but no other expenses, and the worker was allowed to keep his vehicle, the report states.

In another case, a Safety and Permits Department official was caught by a television station with four city vehicles in his driveway. The official later stated in an internal memo that he considered one vehicle unreliable, another was a new car to replace the older one, a third he was using while another employee was ill and the fourth had not been assigned yet.

The report states the Nagin administration also is breaking state and city laws that require all city vehicles to be clearly marked, as well as a city ordinance prohibiting vehicles from being taken to employees' homes outside Orleans Parish.

One employee takes a car home to Destrehan, another goes to Mandeville and two go more than 140 miles each day traveling to and from Baton Rouge, according to the report.

A city ordinance requires Hatfield to set up a motor pool for employees to use on city business, but the report states it has never been followed.

Another long-standing city ordinance requires Hatfield to file quarterly reports of take-home vehicles to the City Council, something that was not done for years until the council requested the information in September.

Cerasoli's report also complained the Department of Public Works did not give his inspectors immediate access to their vehicles, delaying the report and challenging the inspector general's charter authority. Cerasoli called on the city to provide written guidance of the authority of his office.

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