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OIG PROVIDES GUIDANCE TO REFORM SAFETY & PERMITS DEPARTMENT

The New Orleans Office of Inspector General released a report today providing recommendations for reform of the New Orleans Safety & Permits (S&P) Department.

The recommendations stem from detailed observations, also included in the report, made by OIG staff over the course of a review that included embedding OIG staff in S&P from Sept. 23 through Dec. 13 of 2024.

The OIG conducted this review in response to numerous cases of fraud, waste, and abuse within S&P. Since 2013, the OIG has conducted multiple investigations at S&P that led to significant actions taken against City employees and third-party inspectors. The results of these investigations led to at least 15 City employees, including 13 with S&P, being fired or resigning under investigation, and at least 17 contractors losing their operating licenses and/or being completely or partially banned from doing business in the City of New Orleans. Seven former City employees and contractors were indicted following OIG investigations into S&P. These repeated instances pointed to systemic inefficiencies in the system as a whole.

OIG staff made numerous observations regarding S&P over the course of these several months, including two overarching observations:

- Several previous assessments of S&P had already identified similar inefficiencies, but few recommendations for reform had been implemented by City officials.
- Most of these inefficiencies related to an inadequate internal controls system, or systems of oversight and accountability. Specifically, OIG staff observed the following:
 - S&P did not have an effective internal controls system, including a coherent set of operational policies and procedures, and oversight and accountability mechanisms.
 - S&P's permitting and inspections divisions failed to create and implement a formal training policy and procedure.
 - S&P's permitting and inspection divisions operated without a clear and consistent workflow structure.
 - S&P lacked robust internal review mechanisms for approved permits and inspections.
 - S&P did not consistently enforce permitting and inspection requirements and fees for inappropriate or inadequate permit applications and inspections.

In response to these observations, the OIG issued 12 recommendations for reform, beginning with two overarching recommendations.

- The City and S&P leadership should prioritize addressing the issues that have been consistently pointed out since 2021 by several independent assessments.
- The starting point for any reform effort must be the development and implementation of a clearer, more vigorous, and more transparent system of internal management. S&P should establish a coherent set of operational policies and procedures documented in a single unified policies and procedures manual. This S&P manual should establish a clear system of internal mechanisms for oversight and accountability.

Inspector General Ed Michel stated:

“Fulfilling our mission is particularly important when it involves public safety. A properly performing S&P is critical to ensuring public safety as well as daily function in the City of New Orleans. Ineffective operations, such as approval of improperly performed inspections, can lead to building collapses and other catastrophic and even fatal events, as well as significant litigation against the City. We acknowledge the reform efforts taken by S&P leadership, and we believe that reform of S&P is possible and that our recommendations, when implemented, will foster effective practices, boost accountability, and lessen the potential for corruption at this essential City agency.”

For the full report, including the entire set of recommendations, please visit NolaOIG.gov.

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