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State Commission of Investigation / Worth keeping

Posted: Monday, April 26, 2010 |

The severity of the state's budget crisis makes it tough this year to target individual programs for special consideration. So many worthwhile programs have been slashed, and so many people have been affected. Still, there are a few relatively small cuts that make a big difference and that the Legislature should try to restore.

Here's one: \$3.5 million in funding for the State Commission of Investigation.

Gov. Chris Christie's proposed reduction would gut the SCI of all but \$1 million of funding and fold its remaining staff, along with the staff of the Inspector General's Office, into the State Comptroller's Office. The administration says the SCI, the comptroller and the inspector general all perform similar jobs of going after corruption and waste.

To some extent, that's true. But the SCI is the only one of the three that is funded through the legislative budget. The commission has often found corruption, mismanagement and waste in a state bureaucracy that is controlled by the governor. Its independence has served taxpayers well, and that check-and-balance is essential to keep.

A few recent examples: The SCI documented how the state Department of Corrections allows gangs to thrive in prisons. It found the state Department of Health and Human Services' hospital charity-care program failed to recover tens of millions of dollars in fraud and third-party claims. That report resulted in legislation to prevent such abuses in the future. And the SCI found Treasury Department officials who took thousands of dollars in gifts from a contractor and then overlooked \$1 million in overbillings. That report resulted in criminal convictions.

Some economies might be made in the SCI - starting, perhaps, with the \$35,000 salaries paid to commissioners. Still, the SCI does have a 40-year track record of saving millions of tax dollars.

State Senate President Stephen M. Sweeney, D-Gloucester, and some other lawmakers are angry that Christie has breached the separation between the legislative and executive branches of government by cutting the Legislature's budget. He has a point. And that breach is particularly disturbing when the cut is eliminating the watchdog that often investigates the administration

itself.

Certainly, the SCI is not the only cut made by Christie that the Legislature should try to find funds to restore. Programs that serve the most struggling seniors and families - such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Pharmaceutical Assistance for the Aged and Disabled program - should also get priority, in our opinion.

But the amount needed to make sure this watchdog continues to be effective and independent is a relatively small amount that is likely, based on past history, to continue to reap substantial savings for taxpayers.

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