



Everything New Orleans

Curbing government travel and credit card expenses in New Orleans: An editorial

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During former New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin's administration, taxpayers financed thousands of dollars in questionable travel and credit card expenses for the mayor and his top staff.



MICHAEL DeMOCKER / The Times-Picayune

Former New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, pictured during a 2009 press conference, went on a taxpayer-funded world tour in 2008 and 2009. New policies recommended by the inspector general's office would help curb travel and credit card expenses.

Now a report by **Inspector General Ed Quatrevaux** says lax policies regarding such expenses contributed to the problem. Mr. Quatrevaux and **Mayor Mitch Landrieu's staff are teaming up to change that**, and that's a welcome reform.

The inspector general **is recommending 93 policy changes** regarding travel and credit card expenses. Some are commonsense measures any municipality should have, such as banning reimbursement for hotel charges covering entertainment and mini bar items.

Another recommendation requires obtaining price quotes from three airlines before purchasing a ticket, restricting city travel to coach, economy or business class and no longer paying for travel by companions or spouses. Documentation would be required for all eligible expenses.

Changes like these are sorely needed. Mr. Quatrevaux's report was prompted by a review of former Sanitation Director Veronica White's expenses. She had more than \$6,350 in charges to her city credit card in 2007-08 and took 13 city-financed trips costing almost \$27,000.

Mayor Nagin also went on a taxpayer-funded world tour in 2008 and 2009, including trips to South Africa, Panama, Australia, Mexico, Cuba and twice to China. Most were posh junkets with a questionable public purpose. And in just a six-month period, Mayor Nagin's aides charged more than \$150,000 on travel, hotels and restaurants -- with two aides alone responsible for an eye-popping \$81,268 in charges.

Clearly, travel and credit card expenses were out of control.

Unlike his predecessor, who was defensive when it came to the inspector general's reports, Mayor Landrieu is vowing to fully or partially implement almost all of the report's recommendations by next month. In some cases, however, some of the new rules are still not as explicit as the inspector general's office sought. The mayor should review the new policies to make sure they will effectively curb waste and abuse.

City residents understand that travel, dining and other entertainment expenses are needed at times. But when taxpayers are picking up the tab, those expenses should be used only when they are unavoidable or when they serve a clear public purpose. Ample disclosure and documentation should be the rule every time.

The inspector general's recommendations should help achieve that level of accountability -- and Mayor Landrieu's team will be judge by those results.

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