**Sample Op-Ed Pieces**

Do HISD trustees want their chief auditor to be a watchdog or a lapdog?
By Richard F. Chambers
*Houston Chronicle,* September 9, 2016

Demands for transparency and accountability are growing nationally at a time when trust is crumbling in public institutions. This growing intemperance reflects the public’s desire for assurance that taxpayer-supported institutions operate honestly, efficiently and effectively.

Now more than ever, those entrusted with doing the work of the people must embrace an unwavering commitment to openness and never allow personal gain or political maneuvering to detract from that work.

The Board of Trustees at the Houston Independent School District appear to have forgotten all about that commitment.

Last week, the HISD failed to renew the contract of its embattled chief auditor, Richard Patton, who raised questions about cost overruns in the district’s massive $1.9 billion construction bond program. He was suspended by the district in March for unspecified allegations of misconduct and was allowed to return to work in a diminished capacity in August. Despite requests by Patton’s attorney, the district has refused to make public the investigation, which cost a reported $17,000.

Harris County taxpayers should be outraged that their hard-earned dollars were used to pay for a questionable investigation and that the findings of that investigation remain under wraps. They should demand its immediate release.

It is particularly troubling that this questionable behavior by HISD trustees is occurring when they should be raising questions about cost overruns, instead. Here’s why. Patton and his attorneys say he was suspended after notifying the FBI, the HISD police chief and the Harris County District Attorney's Office about possible illegalities in the district's construction contracts, according to published reports.

Harris County taxpayers should be appalled by the reprehensible treatment of an accomplished professional simply doing his job. Internal auditors provide assurance on the efficiency and effectiveness of operations and often play a crucial watchdog role in government by exposing fraud, waste, and abuse. However, it appears HISD would rather have a lapdog than a watchdog.

Taxpayers also should be concerned that the board of trustees will continue on their misguided journey when it comes time to hire a new chief auditor. There seems little reason to believe trustees won’t hire someone who will fill the role in name only, not in function. They showed they have little interest in learning the objective truth about the district’s operations when they “shot the last messenger.”

Even if the trustees have an epiphany about the value of internal audit and try to find a suitable replacement for Patton, the damage has already been done. The school district’s tarnished reputation will precede it, making it harder to find a qualified and independent professional to take on the role of HISD chief auditor. That may be the biggest outrage of all.

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Audits: Don't Shoot the Messengerby Richard F. Chambers

*Orlando**Sentinel*, April 22, 2009

As corporate citizens in Central Florida, we at the global headquarters of The Institute of Internal Auditors have followed with interest the issues of the Orlando-Orange County Expressway Authority. We were quite pleased to learn in 2007 that the authority had decided to strengthen its accountability and transparency by hiring an internal auditor. Fast-forward to this February when the internal auditor resigned out of frustration, citing a lack of commitment to real reform by agency officials. We wonder what it will take for the Expressway Authority to take steps toward good governance.

It's often said that government can be effective only if it maintains the public's trust. With this in mind, internal auditors in government play a pivotal role in reinforcing that trust. Their work provides assurance to taxpayers and citizens that resources are deployed effectively and that public officials are good stewards of taxpayer dollars, such as toll money.

Although most government officials welcome the insight that comes from an effective internal-audit program, an increasing number appear threatened by the scrutiny that accompanies critical audit results — lashing out at the messenger. This might have been the case with the Expressway Authority.

A former board member questioned why the agency didn't hire an outside auditor "who could act independently." Appropriate reporting structures outlined by our organization's standards, as well as those from the Government Accountability Office, position internal auditors to provide thorough and independent assessments. They work inside an organization, which allows them to understand its culture, systems, and operations.

Case in point: the Expressway Authority. By all indications, standards for independence were followed, and the audits clearly identified what needed to be improved. The issue with the internal auditor was not independence. It appears the Expressway Authority board and management might have been reluctant to make substantive change. What more would an outside auditor do that the internal auditor didn't?

Our public officials and government-agency leaders need to open their eyes and ears and embrace the value internal auditors bring to the boardroom. They are the first line of defense in ensuring public trust, and even though their efforts are often under a public microscope, they persevere in the face of extraordinary challenges.

Internal auditors working in government are unsung heroes. Hopefully, the Expressway Authority's next attempt at internal auditing will rebuild much-needed trust and have an outcome we can all be proud of.

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