

Report calls for greater visibility

Put spending data online, panel says

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By Jan Moller

BATON ROUGE -- State government should make financial and regulatory information more accessible to the public while boosting the independence and resources of its internal watchdog, according to an advisory report issued Tuesday to Gov. Bobby Jindal.

The transition task force on government and fiscal reform also recommended that all proceedings in the state Senate be broadcast and archived on the Legislature's Web site, as is the case with committee and floor debates in the House of Representatives.

Jindal never directly promised to cut spending, even as he frequently criticized the 2007 Legislature for adding more than 1,100 new state jobs without a comprehensive plan. Perhaps as a result, the report does not include any specific calls to reduce expenses and instead focuses largely on ways to make government spending more transparent.

Some of the recommendations are vague -- such as a "demand that all departments act as honest stewards of the public's money by requiring agency expenditures to be viewed online" -- while others are virtually incomprehensible to a layman.

Recommendation No. 11, for example, recommends instituting "citizen-centric government through matrix management," mimicking an information technology practice that's become common at large corporations such as General Motors and Cisco.

Other suggestions appear to be no-brainers, such as a recommendation that "all reports required by law are completed and made immediately available to the public." In practice, that's not always the case, and reports can be difficult to access through some agency Web sites, according to the report.

Perhaps the most far-reaching recommendation in the report calls for streamlining the way tax credits are administered. According to the report, there are several tax-incentive programs on the books that are not being used, while others are not being administered efficiently.

Without citing examples, the report criticized business tax-credit programs where some companies earn credits that are greater than the taxes they owe. They then sell the credits through brokers for pennies on the dollars to other firms that can use them to reduce their tax liabilities.

"This complex process of transferring economic incentives to the intended target of the incentive is both expensive and inefficient," according to the report, which recommends making tax credits refundable. It also calls for strengthening the Office of Inspector General by giving it subpoena power, increasing its budget and protecting it from political repercussions.

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