

Montgomery Co. to test fraud hot line

Inspector General's Office hopes to deter scam artists

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Just as they can with incidents of gang activity, Montgomery County residents soon will be able to phone in tips about possible cases of fraudulent activity.

County leaders on Monday supported a one-year trial period for a fraud hot line brought forth by the Office of the Inspector General.

The hot line would be a new, dedicated telephone number from which citizens can report possible violations of county law or policy, abuses of power by members of the local government and any other potential schemes to take advantage of county residents.

County Council Member Phil Andrews, who has supported the idea, said the thrust is to provide residents another tool in notifying the authorities of potential scams.

"It is something that is common practice in many places," he said. "It helps deter fraud and brings light to what the inspector general should be looking at. ... Not everyone has the Internet and can just log on to a Web site to register complaints."

As far as the governmental watchdog function, Andrews said that with the county overseeing a whopping \$4 billion it's crucial that the inspector general's office goes a good job in protecting taxpayers' money.

In a report spelling out the benefits of the tipline to the County Council, Inspector General Thomas Degley said that hot lines have become a popular way for governments to protect the public from being swindled. The Association of Certified Fraud Examiners, in fact, found in 2004 that agencies most often detect fraud through a tip and that hot lines providing anonymity to callers is one of the best ways to solicit tips.

He added that starting up a hot line will not require additional staff, and it will only cost \$17,000 at the most to implement.

The plan right now is to get the phone line up and running in November.

The Inspector General was established by the County Council in 1997 to prevent and detect fraud, waste and abuse in governmental activities as well as to propose ways to increase the accountability of government agencies.

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