Rebuilding the public trust

The Miami Herald Editorial
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It was a sad day in November 2010 when Broward County voters agreed to hire yet another watchdog, this one independent and with teeth, to monitor the behavior of their elected officials.

Sad because it was necessary. Voters watched repeatedly as their elected officials, including their top law enforcer, Sheriff Ken Jenne, made perp walks to jail on an astounding variety of criminal charges. Sad because those accusations coming from both federal and state prosecutors appear to have made only a small dent in the cozy culture of cronyism and corruption. And sad because the existing layers of watchdogs seemed inadequate to shift this cultural paradigm into another gear.

It’s now been nearly a year since the hiring of Broward’s first inspector general. It is overseen by an independent board. The job is dedicated solely to investigating in Broward local government — county and 31 cities — as well as the government purchasing process and the private companies supplying goods and services. (Unfortunately, the power does not extend to the School Board.)

Its portfolio takes in a sweep of corruption, fraud, waste and gross mismanagement. It must refer its findings to other agencies for prosecution or other remedies — and follow-up — except it can bring accusations of violations of the county’s own ethics codes to a hearing officer.

The man filling the post is John W. Scott, who specialized in public corruption as a federal prosecutor and who also served as attorney for Miami-Dade’s inspector general. His office has just gained formal recognition from the FBI, giving it access to many of the information and investigatory tools of a police department.

This year, the office has investigated the shocking mismanagement of Lauderdale Lakes, which was allowed by the Broward Sheriff’s Office to run up a $9-million debt to taxpayers countywide for public-safety services; management problems in the Broward Medical Examiner’s Office; and issues within the county’s program for small businesses that permitted several to function as merely brokers for county contracts.

The investigation into the medical examiner’s office began with an inquiry into reports of missing and mismanaged narcotics taken from the scenes of deaths. As that inquiry began, Gov. Rick Scott declined to reappoint long-time examiner Joshua Perper. Following Mr. Scott’s report in February, the county asked examiners from Pasco and Pinellas counties to examine the office. This month, Mr. Scott delivered recommendations to improve the office’s management and practices. This should ease the transition for newly hired Navy Capt. Craig Mallack, a veteran examiner for the armed forces.

The inspector’s office also has fought a rearguard action by city officials to weaken the countywide ethics code. Part of that code forbids officials to solicit funds for charities. Seems innocuous? Not in practice when donors attempt to curry favor with a city commissioner who is currying favor with bold-face names on charity boards. But some cities want to make all charities “city sponsored” so they can continue the practice.
Plus three cities — Wilton Manors, Sea Ranch Lakes and Hillsboro Beach — want to evade strict disclosure of outside income and bans on lobbying on elected officials lobbying other agencies.

It would be lovely to take these officials on trust because they say their hearts are in the right place. But as voters said in 2010, the public trust in the honesty, efficiency and efficacy of Broward government needs to be rebuilt. How sad it was so badly shattered.