

## GUEST COMMENTARY

BY THERESA MCCOURT

# Save The Watchdog



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In California government, taxpayers have very few real friends. But come November, they may lose one of their last defenders.

Since 1955, the auditor general has exposed a huge range of wasteful government practices.

These findings have saved hundreds of millions of dollars and made a multitude of services more effective.

A few examples of the office's disclosures of wasted money in recent years include: \$67 million in grants and other funds mismanaged by the Oakland Unified School District; \$156 million in federal funds for California's foster care programs that went unclaimed by the Department of Social Services; at least \$26.6 million in state funds wasted in one year because of weak fiscal controls among 30 state agencies.

Further, through the office's yearly audit of the state's financial state-

ments, California receives \$16 billion annually in federal funds. No other state department or outside contractor can conduct this audit as efficiently.

Even though the office has benefited the state so significantly, it spends less to expose government abuse than any other state. For every dollar the office spends, it saves California taxpayers more than \$6.

So why is the office threatened with closure? In November 1990, taxpayers voted for Proposition 140, not only to impose term limits but also to cut legislative spending by 38 percent. To meet the cuts, the Legislature laid off more than 600 employees. It also cut several district offices.

The Legislature then looked beyond the Capitol for more cuts and found two offices, the legislative analyst's and the auditor general's.

Even though the auditor general receives no legislative funds for its operations, legislators decided that the office fell within the meaning of "total aggregate expenditures of the Legislature" for the purposes of Prop. 140.

The fact that the office actually receives its funding from the state's General Fund, not the Legislature's

budget, was never revealed in the politicians' speeches to the public.

Indeed, it is the auditor general's nonpartisan stance that has left it vulnerable to closure. The office's reports are always unbiased, never favoring one party or person over another. Now, it has no political favors to fall back on. And the employees of the office, exempt from civil service status, have no union to defend them.

Meanwhile, the auditor general is struggling to do its job even though half of the staff have resigned because of the financial uncertainties Prop. 140 has caused.

Ultimately, however, the decision as to whether the office will stay open is left to the voters. In November, they will have the opportunity to retain their advocate by voting "yes" on Proposition 159. This measure will allow the auditor general to continue its work for taxpayers without legislative constraints.

If taxpayers do not pass this proposition, they may never know how much public money such a mistake could cost. They would have written off the one office that could have told them. □