



Inspector general is asked to investigate Citizens ethics



Mary Ellen Klas, Times/Herald Tallahassee Bureau

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TALLAHASSEE — Two top executives at Citizens Property Insurance called for an investigation Monday into the way the state-run insurer handles employees who leave the agency to go to work for companies that receive contracts.

Citizens CEO Barry Gilway and chairman of the board Chris Gardner asked the agency's inspector general, Bruce Meeks, to conduct an independent investigation in the wake of a report by the *Times/Herald* on the recent spate of executives who have left the state-run insurance company to go to work for vendors.

State law prohibits all employees who are responsible for a contract from leaving a state agency to go to work for a company that holds that contract. Citizens applies the law only to senior executives and members of the board of directors and says there is no ethical breach when an employee with oversight of a company contract takes a job handling other matters at the same company.

The *Times/Herald* found that in the past three years, at least three senior executives at Citizens Property Insurance who were in charge of multimillion-dollar contracts awarded to private companies went to work months later for those same companies.

The head of the Florida Senate Banking and Insurance Committee, Sen. David Simmons, also called for changes to the existing ethics law to ensure "that we not only prevent impropriety but any appearance of impropriety."

Gilway and Gardner said in a joint statement that they were confident Citizens was applying the laws appropriately. But Gilway said the review was needed "to ensure Citizens is operating in a transparent and ethical manner."

Dan Krassner, director of Integrity Florida, also called Monday for Meeks to investigate the ethics practices at Citizens, but he also urged the inspector general to investigate whether the contracts cited in the *Times/Herald* report "provided the best deals for the public."

"The public deserves to know if Citizens executives are privately gaining from their positions with the state-run insurer," Krassner said in a statement.

Gardner noted that Citizens has a "unique role as a government entity providing insurance similar to the private market."

He said that in the past two years, Citizens has made "increased oversight and transparency a top priority and has carefully reviewed and strengthened its internal oversight procedures regarding travel expenses, procurement and governance.

"I look forward to a review by our inspector general to ensure that post-employment guidelines are also appropriate," Gardner said.

In 2013, the Florida Legislature created the inspector general position to provide oversight at Citizens and, in December, Gov. Rick Scott and the Florida Cabinet appointed Meeks to the role.

Meeks, a Tallahassee lawyer, reports to the governor and Cabinet, which serve as the Financial Services Commission. The law prevents Citizens staffers from interfering with his investigations.

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