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**Delray Community Redevelopment Agency will face state audit**

**State legislators question CRA funding of The Arts Garage**

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The [Delray Beach](http://www.sun-sentinel.com/community/news/delraybeach?track=tax-delraybeach) Community Redevelopment Agency will have to open its financial books for all to see.

State legislators Monday approved a request to audit the agency, which is in charge of eliminating blight and creating economic development in areas of the city.

Sen. Joseph Abruzzo, D-Royal Palm Beach, presented the item during a committee meeting in Tallahassee and it was immediately unanimously approved.

"It is my belief and intent to have the Auditor General audit the CRA," Abruzzo said. "And if they're not doing anything wrong, which hopefully is everyone's preference, then that's what we would want. We want it to come back with a clean bill of health."

The request to have the CRA audited came from Sen. Jeff Clemens, D-Lake Worth, and former [Boynton Beach](http://www.sun-sentinel.com/community/news/boyntonbeach?track=tax-boyntonbeach)Community Redevelopment Director Lisa Bright. They are questioning CRA expenditures, especially the nearly $310,000-funding of The Arts Garage, a performing arts venue and community arts academy that was created to bring foot traffic to the Pineapple Grove Arts District.

In a letter to Abruzzo, Bright said, "the fact that tax dollars are being given to support a 501 C3 non-profit organization...having nothing whatsoever to do with blight or slum conditions is also concerning."

The CRA first came under fire for funding the Arts Garage March 16, a few days after the municipal election. In a letter to the city and CRA officials, resident Gerry Franciosa asked whether the CRA's funding of the popular cultural organization violated a 2010 Florida Attorney General opinion regarding CRA funding of nonprofits.

But CRA Executive Director Diane Colonna said the agency has always operated in compliance with state rules. She also said that before funding The Arts Garage, the agency's attorney gave an interpretation of the Attorney General's opinion that allowed the agency to support the nonprofit.

"Based on our plan and programs and our understanding of the statute, we are operating in conformance," Colonna said. "We are confident that everything that we're doing, we're doing under the law. We have absolutely nothing to hide."

Clemens could not be reached for comment Tuesday despite several calls to both his district offices.

Delray Vice Mayor Al Jacquet said he was just learning about the audit and couldn't comment. He did say he wish the request had been filed by a legislator whose district includes [Delray Beach](http://www.sun-sentinel.com/community/news/delraybeach?track=tax-delraybeach).

"Someone who knows more about [Delray Beach](http://www.sun-sentinel.com/community/news/delraybeach?track=tax-delraybeach)," he said.

Bright could not be reached for comment Monday despite several calls and emails. Bright filed a whistleblower suit against [Boynton Beach](http://www.sun-sentinel.com/community/news/boyntonbeach?track=tax-boyntonbeach) in 2011, alleging that she was fired in September 2010 because former Mayor Jose Rodriguez retaliated against her.

Bright alleged Rodriguez "forcibly kissed" her in December 2006 after "he had lured her" to talk about her job. She alleged that at a conference in January 2008, Rodriguez "forcibly grabbed [her] by the shoulders while screaming in her face about a matter that she had publicly disagreed with him on."

The lawsuit alleges Rodriguez went on to convince [Palm Beach County](http://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/local/palmbeach/) prosecutors to investigate her for an alleged criminal conflict of interest. Prosecutors cleared Bright in the investigation.

Colonna said this is the first time the Delray CRA has been audited in the 25 years it has existed, but she said CRAs throughout the state get audited often.

"I'm not concerned," Colonna said of the audit. "We don't expect them to identify any real issues."

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