ELECTION

Surely you know what Denver’s auditor does. This explainer is just in case you don’t.

Denverites will vote for a watchdog May 7.

Denver City Auditor Timothy O’Brien speaks to a reporter in his office, April 3, 2019. (Kevin J. Beaty/Denverite)

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Timothy O’Brien is a strikingly even-keeled guy, at least when he’s been interviewed by a reporter. I guess you have to be if your job is to keep the city government above board.

O’Brien is Denver’s city auditor, a job that people usually hear about when a government body has mismanaged funds or otherwise messed up. His job is kind of like that of the maligned IRS auditor, except the city auditor ensures your tax dollars are being spent well, rather than ensuring you’ve paid up.

That’s the short of it, but there’s more to the post, which O’Brien will likely fill for a second term come May 7. No opponent is challenging him in the municipal election.

Here’s the long of it.

Your auditor scrutinizes city departments, programs, projects and contractors. Then he calls out the problems.

It’s not just O’Brien — his office has a staff of 65 and a budget of about $9 million. That office gets leads, sort of like a journalist does, and follows up. A tip can come from a would-be fraud detector or a citizen.

Often, though, the auditor’s office creates its own leads. Staffers collect information about city operations all year long — dollars spent, budget changes, past audit reports, the entity’s interaction with the public — and that data helps the office prioritize who or what to scrutinize.

O’Brien and his staff performed 44 audits last year alone. One picked apart the city’s approach to affordable housing. Another one after the Westin hotel, which contracts with the taxpayer-owned airport, for obstructing its attempts to verify financial claims. This year, the auditing team has already clipped the Denver Sheriff Department on the wrist for restraint practices that contravene national safety standards.

The team analyzes data from afar and observes how things work onsite. The point is not to play “gotcha,” O’Brien insists.

"Are there people that don’t like audits? Of course. I mean, I don’t like going to the dentist," O’Brien said. "I think if you look at them as a way to improve the operation, I think that’s healthy."

Anyone can view the auditor’s many reports over the years.

Your auditor watchdogs wages to make sure city workers and contractors are paid fairly. Plumbers, welders, pipe-fitters, painters — all of the trades have something called a "prevailing wage" set by the federal government. It’s essentially the fair going rate for a given job.

The auditor can (and does) monitor the payroll of any company doing work for the city with Denver dollars or on Denver property. If something’s amiss, they’ll confront the employer, sometimes at the job site, and figure out what’s going on. If necessary, the auditor invokes the law to enforce fair pay practices.

Your auditor is supposed to be independent and qualified, but your auditor does not think that always happens.

O’Brien is elected, but would not consider himself — nor the position — political. Being an official who makes decisions for the public creates an automatic conflict of interest, he believes, pointing to his opponent for four years ago, a Denver City Council member who by definition had to take subjective positions quite often.

“I’ve known a lot of people that were the auditor before me, very good people, but I know they don’t have the qualifications or experience necessary for this kind of job,” he said.

O’Brien says he has no conflicts of interest because of course he would! But he was trying to get across that the job demands expertise, not just a good campaign around election season.

O’Brien happens to have been Colorado’s state auditor for 11 years in the ’80s and ’90s. He’s also a certified public accountant, meaning he’s trained financial professionals and has the CPA designation. He says what he is a to a medical examiner. Being a CPA is not a requirement of the office, and he’d like to see that change with a ballot measure, he said.

"Would you want the city attorney to be anything but an attorney?" O’Brien said.

"Would you want the city engineer to be anything other than an engineer? I think the auditor should be an auditor. It’s time to set the bar."

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