

Spitzer to fight public corruption

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ALBANY — The state's top law-enforcement official yesterday told Westchester County District Attorney Jeanine Pirro, the head of the state District Attorneys Association, that he will continue to aggressively pursue public corruption cases despite a dispute over whether he has the legal authority to do so.

Attorney General Eliot Spitzer sent a letter to Pirro defending his decision to set up a unit to investigate public officials. Pirro had criticized the move and claimed he had no legal power to launch such investigations.

"I believe very strongly that the people of the state support an aggressive cooperative effort to root out corruption in government at all levels," Spitzer, a Democrat, said in the letter to Republican Pirro. "I believe that it is a mistake for a sitting district attorney to repel efforts at additional, complimentary enforcement."

Spitzer was responding to Pirro's claim, in an interview with



Eliot Spitzer



Jeanine Pirro

The Journal News, that the attorney general "has no statutory grant of authority to create a statewide office to prosecute state or local corruption." She said such powers are reserved for district attorneys.

Pirro said yesterday she was pleased with Spitzer's offer of support for corruption inquiries but reiterated her position that he lacks the power to launch such investigations on his own.

"We welcome his offer to be of assistance to the district attorneys of this state," Pirro said.

Spitzer spokesman Darren Dopp said the attorney general planned to "move forward as fast as we can to combat a growing and pervasive problem" and was not interested in "quibbling

over the law."

"We're puzzled why we're having a confrontation over something that should be cooperation," he said.

Spitzer's unit has opened 10 investigations into complaints of wrongdoing.

Since taking office in 1994, Pirro has asked for help from the state in prosecuting political corruption cases several times, including one involving Yonkers Councilman Edward Fagan, Westchester County Conservative Party Chairman Vincent Natrella and Yonkers Republican district leader Zehy Jereis in 1998. All pleaded guilty to misdemeanor election law violations.

Pirro said then she couldn't investigate the Natrella case because he was a political supporter and the cases of the other two were intertwined with his.

Dopp said that a dispute over the law shouldn't slow down corruption fighting, but Pirro said, "The bottom line is there has to be the proper prosecuting authority or the investigation is compromised."

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Jeanine