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Stephen Henderson, Deputy Editorial Page Editor

EL

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IN OUR OPINION

Check all of mayor's attorney bills

■ Detroit City Council should require advance approval of Kilpatrick's legal contracts

Outrageous legal bills are bound to be one of Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick's legacies to Detroit. All the more reason for the City Council to increase its vigilance on who's getting paid what.

Council approval is required for city contracts of $25,000 or more. The mayor has discretion for spending at lower amounts.

That makes a big eyebrow-raiser of a recent contract award of $24,500 to attorney James Burdick, the second legal bill just under the council-OK limit in a mere two months. Burdick apparently is to work on requests in the criminal investigation of the mayor.

CARLOS OSORIO/AP

Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick. One recently submitted legal contract was for $24,500, just under the $25,000 limit that would require City Council approval.

Kilpatrick has a history of sidestepping the council's eyeballing of contracts that might prove embarrassing. That became apparent three years ago with a city lease for a convenient $24,995 over two years on a Lincoln Navigator that ended up as the primary vehicle for Kilpatrick's wife.

Now, if council went back to its old policy of approving all contracts of up to $5,000, members might never dig out from the paperwork. But the legal work on behalf of the mayor requires tight scrutiny for a different reason.

Kilpatrick has blurred the lines between his personal and public roles. His public pronouncements ("What you don't want to happen is absolute chaos") have the ring of a municipal Louis XIV ("L'etat c'est moi"). Only the council, with the advice of its independent lawyer, can determine whether he also blurs distinctions when it comes to the dollars spent defending him in his public and private roles.

The mayor clearly has a financial motive to shove as many costs as possible onto city taxpayers — who also apparently will get the bills for lawyers called in to represent lawyers under scrutiny in the city's Law Department, too.

So next week, Councilwoman Sheila Cockrel will propose requiring advance approval of all legal contracts. With the lawyer bills pouring in, and given the mayor's credibility issues with council in the police whistleblower settlement, Detroit taxpayers need at least that much protection.

All of this adds up to yet another reason to wish the mayor would just go, and take his legal liabilities with him.