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Audit: State conservation and recreation agency mismanaged permits, leases; failed to collect \$366k

Posted by Matt Rocheleau July 17, 2013 05:04 PM

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

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A state audit released Wednesday says the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation failed to collect more than \$350,000 in fees and for years missed out on charging late penalties and market-rate value for long-term permits and property leases the department manages.

The report also found that, out of a sample of 127 sites, 25 properties and facilities owned by the department were being used under expired agreements and another 20 had been used for one to five years without the existence of any formal agreement.

Another part of the review found that the department had not set "fair" or "market-based" rates for some of its leases and permits, including some rates that had not been updated in 90 years.

And, the audit found the department failed to ensure users of its site had obtained required liability insurance for about 60 percent of a sample of 115 properties and facilities. Other sites were not properly inspected or documented.

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State Auditor Suzanne Bump and conservation and recreation department commissioner Jack Murray said in a joint press release Wednesday that corrective actions are being implemented at the agency, which oversees 450,000 acres of parks and forests, beaches, bike trails, watersheds, dams, and parkways.

During the audit process, which began in fall of 2011 at the conservation and recreation department's request, officials collected \$198,111 of the \$366,863 in outstanding fees that the audit found. Collection efforts are ongoing for the remaining money, officials said.

Based on recommendations Bump issued as part of the audit, the conservation and recreation department said it is also consolidating and organizing its user agreements; drafting written policies and procedures for its lease management; and is developing a system to track payments.

The audit focused on the department's permitting and leasing operations and reviewed its management of 394 of the 537 agreements it has with various private entities, nonprofits and local municipalities that use public land managed by the department.

"The results of this audit illustrate the importance of investing in systems of accountability," said a statement from Bump. "DCR's lease management staff has been gutted to the bare minimum over recent years, which led, in part, to the significant deficiencies identified in the audit. I'm encouraged by the changes that DCR has made even before the audit report was issued and by its renewed commitment to prioritizing oversight over its lease management program."

Officials said that provisions in the state's fiscal year 2013 budget has allowed department to increase the amount of staff and resources in its lease management unit.

"The audit was a partnership with the goal of reinventing DCR's permits and leases program and eliminating the housing program," said a statement from Murray. "The first step in achieving these goals was to learn the scope of the program deficiencies and hear recommendations on how to proceed."

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