

Audit: State failed to do safety checks at schools, elsewhere

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June 11, 2007

State officials said Monday they are considering a major overhaul of a state agency in charge of public safety inspections after a scathing state audit showed major code violations on school construction projects, boilers and other public safety issues.

Lawmakers said they were stunned to learn that the lives of children were put at risk.

"I suppose I'm shocked that districts would be compromising the safety of Colorado school children by choosing to ignore or accidentally overlooking some of these problems," said Sen. Nancy Spence, R-Centennial.

Don Mares, executive director of the Department of Labor & Employment that oversees the Division of Oil and Public Safety, said the agency was short-staffed but added that was not an excuse for the failures.

The agency is responsible for inspecting and certifying public schools for occupancy, in addition to regulating explosives and inspecting carnivals, amusement parks and boilers.

The audit reviewed architectural drawings for 10 school projects and found 70 code violations, including a lack of sprinklers and fire walls and too few exits. At the time of the review, some of the buildings were completed and occupied while others were still under construction.

Of 10 schools that had been completed, none got the eight inspections required and nine were still issued certificates of occupancy.

Of 26 carnivals and amusement parks auditors that were registered, 10 had expired registrations and 25 of the 26 did not have complete applications, including copies of insurance policies or accident histories.

They also determined that 57 of 157 boilers they reviewed were not properly inspected.

Auditors said the failures presented a serious threat to public safety.

"Buildings that do not have the appropriate fire-rated construction represent a significant life-safety risk to the students and staff," auditors warned.

Mares said the audit is an opportunity to look at the issues that were raised and the way the agency operates. He said because of a lack of manpower, it might be better for the state to ask local government agencies for help.

"The whole Division of Oil and Public Safety needs to be examined," said Mares, who took over as executive director earlier this year after Gov. Bill Ritter replaced term-limited GOP Gov. Bill Owens.

Spence said the state should determine why school districts and state officials weren't fined for failing to conduct mandatory inspections. State officials said fines of \$500 a day can be imposed for code violations, increasing to \$1,000 a day if public safety is compromised. Audit committee members said fines were not part of the audit.