

## **Audit: State Lax on Fire Safety at Schools**

By Ed Sealover, The Gazette  
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DENVER - A number of Colorado public schools were built without proper fire walls, adequate exit doors or effectively located sprinkler systems under a state division whose purpose was to guard against such mistakes, according to a report released Monday by the state auditor's office.

Rep. Victor Mitchell, a member of the Legislative Audit Committee, called it the most scathing report he has seen from the auditor's office.

Other committee members said the Division of Oil and Public Safety, which oversees public school construction and other safety processes, put children in danger by not following the rules laid out for it.

Don Mares, executive director of the Department of Labor and Employment that includes the division, blamed some of the problems on a lack of funding that left one person in charge of overseeing 200 school constructions, renovations and additions each year. But he agreed that changes need to be made.

"I think that if these problems are not corrected in short order, it should be of concern to the public," Mitchell, a Republican who represents Teller County, said afterward. "I think this was good preventative maintenance."

The division's duties include the adoption of building-code standards for public schools, the issuance of building permits and the later issuance of certificates of occupancy when facilities are completed and up to code. The audit found problems in each of those areas.

A contractor reviewed 10 building plans that had been approved by the division and found at least 70 code issues in each of the projects. Those included two kindergarten classrooms in one school with "erroneously low" occupancy calculations that left them with one exit door rather than two, and an 8-foot-tall "crawl space" in another school with no sprinkler system.

About half of the projects reviewed received approval despite being submitted without proper documentation, and one school received a certificate of occupancy after a site inspection despite the fact that it was still under construction, the audit found. The division inspector, who has since been replaced, had less than 18 months' experience on that job and was not certified to conduct building plan reviews.

"The problems we found raised significant concerns about . . . the division's ability to ensure the safety of the children and staff who occupy these schools," auditor Jennifer Harmon said.

The audit, conducted in 2006, did not identify the schools where problems were found.

Division director Dick Piper said his staff would go back to those schools and make changes, however.

Recommendations were myriad but typically dealt with implementing new processes to

ensure that proper oversight measures are taken. A new building inspector with more than 25 years of experience has been hired to oversee the program, Piper said.

Mares also offered to work with legislators on the audit committee on a bill that will address the statutory changes that need to be made.

Those are likely to include a request to fund more workers to carry out the program, Piper said.

"I intend to run a safety-efficient program," Mares told the committee.

The audit also found problems in areas of the division that regulate the safety of explosives, boilers and rides at carnivals and amusement parks.

Documentation of safety inspections was missing on most of the amusement rides examined by the audit and one "large, well-known park" was operating with an expired registration throughout 2005, the report said.

The division, which has only a part-time worker looking after those rides, also did not demand enough independent verification of safety, the report said; one safety inspection, for example, was done by someone who was also the owner and designer of the carnival ride.

Despite the shortage of employee inspectors, Mitchell said throwing cash at the problem is not the way to solve it. But he added that he was pleased the department accepted the findings and that he looks forward to its recommendations about ways to fix the problems.