

H. CARL McCALL
STATE COMPTROLLER



A.E. SMITH STATE OFFICE BUILDING
ALBANY, NEW YORK 12236

STATE OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE STATE
COMPTROLLER

March 31, 1998

Ms. Bernadette Castro
Commissioner
NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
Empire State Plaza, Agency Building #1
Albany, NY 12238

Re: Review of Selected Financial
Management Practices
Report 97-D-21

Dear Ms. Castro:

Pursuant to the State Comptroller's authority as set forth in Section 1, Article V, of the State Constitution, and Section 8, Article 2, of the State Finance Law, we reviewed selected financial management practices of the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (Parks) for the period January 1, 1995 through October 31, 1997.

The objective of our review was to assess the validity of several allegations made by an anonymous complainant regarding Parks' operating practices. The allegations focused on the Long Island Region's assignment and usage of Parks housing facilities and automobile fleet vehicles, as well as selected personnel issues. To accomplish this objective, we interviewed Parks officials and staff, reviewed relevant files and documents, and made physical observations of selected Parks facilities.

A. Background

The New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation administers 11 park regions, including the Long Island Region (Region), which encompasses Nassau and Suffolk counties. The Region expended more than \$27 million on operations during fiscal year 1997, including \$20.5 million for personal services. Payments to seasonal employees account for approximately one half of this amount.

Parks maintains 51 housing units on the Region's park grounds, most of which are reserved for employees whose presence help deliver a service to the public and protect Parks property. The Region also maintains a fleet of 73 motor vehicles for business-related travel.

In a recent audit (Report 96-S-57), issued June 24, 1997, we noted that an environment exists in the Region that appears to provide benefits to favored individuals, and that it is important for Parks management to ensure that public resources are used in a reasonable and cost-effective manner. Due to the nature of the allegations received, this review focuses on selected aspects of the operational areas addressed in Report 96-S-57.

B. Results of Review

We found that Parks officials need to improve the procedures they follow when they hire individuals for non-classified positions. They also should reassess the adequacy of their current automobile lease/purchasing practices to ensure that all necessary amenities are secured at the best possible price. The assignment and usage of Parks housing facilities and automobile fleet vehicles appear to be in compliance with Parks' policies.

The allegations received and the results of our review are as follows:

- 1) *"The Long Island Region financed a \$70,000 renovation to the Parks Commissioner's summer retreat at Lake Taghkanic."*

Parks officials informed us that they only know of one occasion where the Commissioner has utilized a cabin facility at Lake Taghkanic. They explained that the primary purpose of her stay was to observe park observations. To avoid being noticed, the reservation fee was paid for with her son's credit card, and a copy of the receipt was provided for our review.

We reviewed the Long Island Region's park housing work logs and found that all renovations and repairs financed by the Region were for housing units located within the Long Island parks. We also made a site visit to Lake Taghkanic to determine whether any major renovations had been made to any particular cottage/cabin facility in that park. We found that the Taconic Park Region had financed a total of \$75,000 to renovate a series of cabins and cottages located within that region, all of which are available for use by the general public. At the time of our visit, about \$69,000 had already been expended for this purpose. However, we found no evidence that a renovation that cost \$70,000 was made to an individual housing unit as stated in the allegation.

Recommendation: None

- 2) *"The original radio in the Commissioner's State car was removed and with a more expensive one."*

Our review of the Region's vehicle maintenance records showed that several radio repairs and

enhancements have been made to the vehicle used by the Commissioner. However, they were made prior to her appointment. The work orders for these repairs are supported by user complaints regarding the quality of radio reception. We also found that the Commissioner recently received a 1997 Ford Expedition to replace the former vehicle. This new vehicle was already equipped with the necessary radio equipment; there is no indication that it has been upgraded.

Subsequent to our review, we received another anonymous call alleging that the vehicle in which the radio was was a Parks police vehicle sometimes used to transport the Commissioner. We did not return to confirm this assertion.

Recommendation: None

3) *“Upon his appointment, the Region’s Deputy Commissioner was assigned a new vehicle to which \$3,000 worth of subsequent improvements were made.”*

In early 1997, almost two years after his appointment, the Region’s Deputy Commissioner was assigned a new Chevrolet Blazer which did not contain any manufacturer or dealer upgrades. Because of reported problems with his lower back, the Region paid for several vehicle upgrades that were suppose to make his driving more comfortable. The additional amenities include power windows, power door locks, tilt steering wheel, and cruise control. The total cost for these upgrades was approximately \$3,000.

We found that the upgrades were done, and although they do not appear extravagant, one could argue that they were not absolutely necessary.

Recommendation:

Ensure that only necessary upgrades are made to Parks vehicles. To achieve the potential cost benefits of competitive bidding, the need for upgrades should be addressed at the time the vehicle is leased or purchased.

(Parks officials agreed with our recommendation. They added that this was an exception, not the rule, and steps will be taken to ensure it does not occur again.)

4) *“A 21-year-old female [name withheld] was hired by Regional officials at an annual salary of \$72,000, at the request of a Long Island-based political official.”*

Our interview with Parks officials, and review of relevant payroll and personnel records, found that a 29-year-old female was recently appointed to one of the Region’s exempt (non-competitive) positions at an annual salary of \$62,000 that soon increased to \$64,000. (Parks replied that this was a result of a statewide general salary increase for all employees.) Her job responsibilities, for which - based on her resume - she appears to be qualified, include public relations for park activities and special events, as well as Parks fund-raising. We found that this position was filled without the

benefit of public advertising or solicitation of other qualified applicants. Thus, there is less assurance that the best qualified person was given the job. We note that this position has been in existence since 1992 and the new appointee's predecessor was paid a higher salary.

Recommendation:

Fill all vacant Parks positions, exempt or otherwise, by an open and competitive process, to help ensure that the most qualified candidates are considered for appointment.

(Parks officials replied that "Although there is no require to advertise for exempt positions, we did interview other potential candidates." Contrary to the assertion of Parks officials, we found no evidence that the selection process included interviewing other candidates.)

5) *"Approximately 60 seasonal parks patrol officers are retained for extended service each year."*

During our recently-completed audit, we received an anonymous allegation that several seasonal park patrol officers had been given preferential treatment by being offered extended post-summer employment. At that time, we found that about 60 seasonal officers are hired each year. Approximately 15 of these are retained for extended service, without the benefit of a formal selection process. Therefore, the basic allegation of 60 officers being retained for extended service is factually incorrect.

In response to our prior report, Parks officials indicated that they would formalize and document their extended-service selection process in the future. Since hiring for the summer of 1998 had not yet begun at the time of this writing, we are unable to confirm that they have done so.

Recommendation: None

(In response to this report, Parks officials indicated that they did provide written notice to all seasonal police extending to them the opportunity to participate in post-season work in the fall of 1997. However, they did not provide any documentation. Parks officials did provide, as part of their response, letters sent in March 1997 to several law enforcement groups for retired police officers and State troopers, notifying them about the summer season. These letters do not refer to extended service.)

6) *"A Regional official [name withheld] is assigned a State vehicle to commute with each day, but he is not on 24-hour or emergency call."*

This official, the Region's Urban Parks Coordinator, is one of several employees we identified in our prior report, whose duties and vehicle usage at the time did not warrant a permanently-assigned State vehicle. In response to our report, Parks officials indicated that they have given this individual additional duties that would increase his vehicle usage and warrant the assignment of a full-time vehicle in accordance with Parks policy.

Our current field work found that the Urban Parks Coordinator's business-related vehicle usage has increased somewhat since the beginning of calendar year 1997. However, it is too soon to determine whether his duties require him to engage in sufficient business travel to warrant a permanently-assigned vehicle.

Recommendation:

Monitor and document the Urban Parks Coordinator's vehicle usage to ensure that he warrants the permanent assignment of a State vehicle.

7) *"Only 8 of the Region's 25 park patrol vehicles are actually used for patrol."*

According to the Region's vehicle inventory roster, the Region currently has 32 park patrol vehicles. Our review of vehicle travel logs and officer assignment sheets found that all of these vehicles are utilized during the peak summer season to patrol the Region's 20 park facilities. Officials told us that the larger parks, such as Jones Beach, warrant at least two patrol vehicles. It appears that all patrol vehicles are used throughout the year, but they are used much less frequently during the off-peak season. In our opinion, these vehicle-usage trends appear reasonable, considering the nature of park attendance and activities.

Recommendation: None

8) *"A Parks secretary resides in the Oakdale Arboretum reserved for park managers and maintenance personnel."*

Our review found that a Parks employee with some secretarial responsibilities does reside in one of the four housing units at the Arboretum. The main residence is occupied by the Arboretum Director. The employee in question has been working at Oakdale for several years and assists the Director in various park-related activities, including maintenance and custodial work. She and four other Regional park staff had applied to reside in the formerly-vacant residence, in accordance with Parks housing policy. Four Regional supervisory-level staff, including the Arboretum's Director, assessed the applications based on the length of service, and the proximity of the applicant's current home to his/her work location. All of them selected the employee in question as the most appropriate person to live in the residence.

Recommendation: None

9) *“The park manager at Connetquot allows his friends to fish on park facilities when the park is closed to the general public.”*

We met with the Connetquot Park Preserve manager, who informed us that several fishing clubs have contracted with Parks to use its facilities when they are otherwise closed to the general public. The clubs apply through the Regional office and pay a permit fee. A minimum number of 20 persons must attend each of the club’s outings. These clubs often contribute park-related furniture and equipment to help maintain Parks grounds. Our subsequent discussion with Parks officials and review of relevant fishing permit files supported the manager’s statements. We found no evidence that any person(s) had received favored treatment at this park.

Recommendation: None

A draft copy of this report was provided to Parks officials for their review and comment. In general, they agree with our report conclusions and recommendations. Their response, in its entirety, is attached as Appendix A.

Within 90 days after final release of this report, as require by Section 170 of the Executive Law, the Commissioner of the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation shall report to the Governor, the State Comptroller, and the leaders of the Legislature and fiscal committees, advising what steps were taken to implement the recommendations contained herein, and where recommendations were not implemented the reasons therefor.

Major contributors to this report were William Challice, Dominick Vanacore, Frank Patone, Myron Goldmeer, and Marticia Madory.

We wish to thank Parks officials for the courtesies and cooperation extended to our auditors during this review.

Yours truly,



Carmen Maldonado
Audit Director

cc: Robert L. King



New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
The Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller Empire State Plaza
Agency Building 1, Albany, New York 12238

518-474-0456
Human Resources
518-474-0453
Fiscal Management
518-474-0061
TDD: 518-486-1899

March 6, 1998

Mr. William Challice
Audit Director
Office of the State Comptroller
Division of Management Audit &
State Financial Services
270 Broadway, 19th floor
New York, New York 10007

Dear Mr. Challice:

We have reviewed your draft report (97-D-21) of selected financial management practices of the Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation for the period January 1, 1995 through October 31, 1997. As we understand it, this review is an addendum to report 96-S-57 in response to certain anonymous allegations filed with your office.

Your review specifically addressed nine issues as follows:

1. *"The Long Island Region financed a \$70,000 renovation to the Parks Commissioner's summer retreat at Lake Taghkanic."*

Recommendation:

None.

Agency Response:

The Commissioner reserved a cabin through the New York State Camping/Cabin Reservation System and paid with a credit card - (see Attachment A). The primary purpose for her stay was to observe park operations. To assure that she would receive no special treatment the reservation was made in her son's name. **This was the only time the Commissioner has stayed in the Taconic Region.**

An Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Agency



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2. *"The original radio in the Commissioner's State car was removed and replaced with a more expensive one."*

Recommendation:

None.

Agency Response:

The Agency concurs with your finding that substantiates the fact that the Commissioner's State car did not have a radio replaced with a more expensive one.

3. *"Upon his appointment, the Region's Deputy Commissioner was assigned a new vehicle to which \$3,000 worth of subsequent improvements were made."*

Recommendation:

Ensure that only necessary upgrades are made to Parks vehicles. To achieve the potential cost benefits of competitive bidding, the need for upgrades should be addressed at the time the vehicle is leased or purchased.

Agency Response:

We concur. A review of our records indicates that this was an exception, not the rule. We will take steps to ensure that this does not occur again.

4. *"A 21-year-old female [name withheld] was hired by Regional officials at an annual salary of \$72,000, at the request of a Long Island-based political official."*

Recommendation:

Fill all vacant Parks positions, exempt or otherwise, by an open and competitive process, to help ensure that the most qualified candidates are considered for appointment.

Agency Response:

Although there is no requirement to advertise for exempt positions, we did interview other potential candidates. The individual's salary increased from \$62,000 to \$64,000 as a result of a statewide general salary increase for all employees.

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5. *"Approximately 60 seasonal parks patrol officers are retained for extended service each year."*

Recommendation:

None.

Agency Response:

As we indicated in our response to audit 96-S-57, we did provide written notice to all seasonal police extending to them the opportunity to participate in post-season work in the fall of 1997. In addition, the Long Island Region contacted, in writing, several law enforcement groups describing these positions and their availability: the Nassau County Association of Retired Police Officers; the Association of Former NYS Troopers, Inc.; and the Retired Police Association of New York, among others - (see Attachment B).

6. *"A Regional official [name withheld] is assigned a State vehicle to commute with each day, but he is not on 24-hour or emergency call."*

Recommendation:

Monitor and document the Urban Parks Coordinator's vehicle usage to ensure that he warrants the permanent assignment of a State vehicle.

Agency Response:

We concur. We will continue to monitor and document the Urban Parks Coordinator's vehicle usage.

7. *"Only 8 of the Region's 25 park patrol vehicles are actually used for patrol."*

Recommendation:

None. The Comptroller's staff found that the vehicle usage trends appear reasonable, considering the nature of park attendance and activities.

Agency Response:

We concur.

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8. *"A Parks secretary resides in the Oakdale Arboretum reserved for park managers and maintenance personnel."*

Recommendation:

None.

Agency Response:

The Parks employee referred to is classified as a Park Worker III and as such has a wide variety of duties (i.e. payroll, park maintenance, cleaning buildings and grounds, and assisting park patrons) at this facility. As indicated in this review, the assignment of the housing unit was appropriate and consistent with State Parks policy.

9. *"The park manager at Connetquot allows his friends to fish on park facilities when the park is closed to the general public."*

Recommendation:

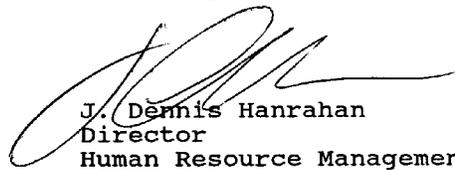
None. The Comptroller's staff found no evidence that any person(s) had received favored treatment at this park.

Agency Response:

We concur.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the draft report.

Sincerely,


J. Dennis Hanrahan
Director
Human Resource Management

Attachments



96/02/40 236 AT MAILED 10 50 XX

The New York State
Camping/Cabin
Reservation System
P.O. Box 1150
1971 Western Avenue
Albany, NY 12203

CAMPING/CABIN RECEIPT AND PERMIT

PERMISSION IS GRANTED TO THE UNDERSIGNED TO OCCUPY THE CAMPSITE INDICATED FOR THE PERIOD AUTHORIZED. PERMITTEE SHALL ABIDE BY THE RULES AND REGULATIONS OF THE STATE CAMPING AND COUNCILS AND SHALL REQUIRE ALL OTHERS IN THE CAMPING PARTY TO DO SO. VIOLATIONS MAY RESULT IN THE CANCELLATION OF THIS PERMIT WITH NO REFUND. NO REFUNDS WILL BE MADE EXCEPT IN CASE OF BOWTIE EMERGENCY (I.E. DEATH OR FAILURE OF SERIOUS ACCIDENT OR ILLNESS). SITES MUST BE VACATED NOT LATER THAN 11 A.M. ON EXPIRATION DATE.

FOR RESERVATIONS AT ANY NEW YORK STATE
OPERATED CAMPSHEDD OR CABIN CALL
1-800/458-CAMP

THIS PERMIT IS NON-TRANSFERABLE
PERMIT NUMBER: 317775

DATE ISSUED: 07/13/96

FOR THE STATE OF NEW YORK
DAVID ALBERT
Bernadette Castro

TACONIC
ACCESS PASS NUMBER: TACONIC-COPAKE 2 PR

BASE RATE	EXTRAS	USE FEE SUB TOTAL	VEHICLE CREDIT	SERVICE CHARGE	TOTAL
\$325.00		\$0.00	+\$10.60		\$335.60
				Less \$0.00	CV643
				Paid \$335.60	0410162

OTHER OCCUPANTS: DR. PETER GUIN
DR. JON MAY
MRS. MAY

FIRST VEHICLE: NISSAN
SECOND VEHICLE: _____
THIRD VEHICLE: _____

NY BLACK LAD

ADDRESS: [REDACTED]

LAST NAME: Westro
FIRST NAME: B
SITE NO.: 120 East

SIGNATURE: [REDACTED]

STATE: NY

CITY: DAVID ROBERTIN

PERMIT TYPE: 07 PERMIT (PUP)

IN PARTY: 1



NEW YORK STATE PARK POLICE
LONG ISLAND REGION
ADMINISTRATION HEADQUARTERS
BELMONT AVENUE - P.O. BOX 247 - BAYLON, NY 11702 - 0247
(516) 669-2500 / Fax (516) 321-5906

March 19, 1997

Mr. Michael McKenna
President
Long Island Chapter
Association of Former New York State Troopers, Inc.
3006 Acorn Avenue
Medford, New York 11763-1842

Dear Mr. McKenna:

The New York State Park Police employ former police officers as seasonal (part-time) police officers during the summer season. State law mandates that we only employ persons who possess the basic police officer training certificate issued by the Municipal Police Training Council (MPTC) or equivalent (certificates issued by NYPD or NYSP). As a result, most of our qualified applicants are recently retired police personnel.

Enclosed is an announcement describing the position and the minimum requirements for employment. It is requested that this information be brought to the attention of your membership so that interested members will be advised of this employment opportunity.

Thank you for your assistance with this matter and please contact me at (516) 669-2500 if I can provide any additional information that may be necessary.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Richard K. O'Donnell.
Richard K. O'Donnell
Captain





NEW YORK STATE PARK POLICE
LONG ISLAND REGION
ADMINISTRATION HEADQUARTERS
BELMONT AVENUE - P.O. BOX 247 - BAYLON, NY 11702 - 0247
(516) 669-2500 / FAX (516) 321-5906

March 19, 1997

Mr. Edward F. Curran
President
Retired Police Association of the State of New York
Post Office Box 727
Farmingdale, New York 11735

Dear Mr. Curran:

The New York State Park Police employ former police officers as seasonal (part-time) police officers during the summer season. State law mandates that we only employ persons who possess the basic police officer training certificate issued by the Municipal Police Training Council (MPTC) or equivalent (certificates issued by NYPD or NYSP). As a result, most of our qualified applicants are recently retired police personnel.

Enclosed is an announcement describing the position and the minimum requirements for employment. It is requested that this information be brought to the attention of your membership so that interested members will be advised of this employment opportunity.

Thank you for your assistance with this matter and please contact me at (516) 669-2500 if I can provide any additional information that may be necessary.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Richard K. O'Donnell".

Richard K. O'Donnell
Captain





NEW YORK STATE PARK POLICE
LONG ISLAND REGION
ADMINISTRATION HEADQUARTERS
BELMONT AVENUE - P.O. BOX 247 - BABYLON, NY 11702 - 0247
(516) 669-2500 / FAX (516) 321-3906

March 19, 1997

Mr. Daniel Scheidel
Nassau County Association
of Retired Police Officers
Post Office Box 442
Mineola, New York 11501

Dear Mr. Scheidel:

The New York State Park Police employ former police officers as seasonal (part-time) police officers during the summer season. State law mandates that we only employ persons who possess the basic police officer training certificate issued by the Municipal Police Training Council (MPTC) or equivalent (certificates issued by NYPD or NYSP). As a result, most of our qualified applicants are recently retired police personnel.

Enclosed is an announcement describing the position and the minimum requirements for employment. It is requested that this information be brought to the attention of your membership so that interested members will be advised of this employment opportunity.

Thank you for your assistance with this matter and please contact me at (516) 669-2500 if I can provide any additional information that may be necessary.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Richard K. O'Donnell".

Richard K. O'Donnell
Captain

AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY/AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AGENCY

