

LOCAL

114-39-800

District locked auditors out, delaying report, Montee says

State auditor also says staff members were denied workspace, use of phones.

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St. Louis Post
Dispatch
St. Louis, MO
Circ. 278471
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7/17/2009
11269



BEVERLY HILLS • As auditors were winding down their fieldwork on the audit of a north St. Louis County fire district, they were startled to find themselves locked out of the building where they had been examining records, the state auditor says.

The incident, which occurred in March, is one of several difficulties experienced by state employees while auditing the Northeast Ambulance and Fire Protection District, state Auditor Susan Montee told the Post-Dispatch in a phone interview.

Montee's office began auditing Northeast late last year in response to a request by former Gov. Matt Blunt. He asked for the audit after receiving complaints from legislators and others alleging financial mismanagement by fire district officials.

The audit has been slow-going, partly due to roadblocks auditors don't typically experience, Montee said.

"Most of the audits that we do, they're generally cooperative — and that's not the case here," she said. "In general, they just did not cooperate in a good sense."

Montee's office had expected to release a report on the audit early this summer, but the report is now expected in late August or September. Even then, the report won't be complete; Montee ex-

pects to release a follow-up report once her office obtains copies of district records it is seeking in a suit filed July 2.

While working at the district's administration building in Beverly Hills, auditors reported "petty things," such as district officials' reluctance to make workspace available and denying use of phones, Montee said. "Even if someone called in asking for the auditor, they couldn't get the call," she said.

Most significant, though, was a failure to hand over documents, she said. "There were just a lot of things that we didn't get from them," she said. "When we were almost done, we said, 'We've got to have all these kinds of documents or else,' ... and they locked us out of the building.

"We had to get the police to come and let us get our things out of there."

District spokesman Airst Wilson said he had no knowledge of any auditors being locked out.

A statement released last week by Elbert Walton Jr., an attorney for the fire district, made no mention of auditors being locked out, but called the audit illegal and said, "Montee's office, having found nothing, determined to harass and harangue district staff."

Regarding records sought by

Montee's office, Walton's statement said the district made the documents available. "However, no one from the state auditor's office appeared at the district's offices at the appointed time to examine the documents."

Montee disputed that. "We had repeatedly tried to get them to tell us whether or not we could get the documents," she said. "They've never put those documents together for us."

Documents still sought include:

- Invoices for 162 bills paid by the board, including \$208,198 paid to Walton; \$92,300 to attorney Bernard Edwards Jr., \$37,570 to Tony Weaver, a consultant to the board, and several thousand dollars to credit card companies and in "building repairs."
- A list of district credit cards and the names of those allowed to use them.
- Fuel logs.
- Closing documents on the purchase of the administration building.
- Any records regarding an in-house investigation involving tools stolen from the firehouse.

The July 2 suit that seeks those and other records also involves the attorney general's office, which alleges violations of the state Sunshine Law by the fire board.