
CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

The Management Audit Committee requested a review of DFPEs code compliance efforts in areas under its jurisdiction and in jurisdictions with local enforcement authority. The Committee also requested a review of Board and Council operations and effectiveness.

We examined these questions within the context of a Department that has undergone extensive changes over the past two years. The current State Fire Marshal has worked to rebuild relationships among stakeholders, and to promote an educational approach to regulation. We were impressed throughout by staff, Council, and Board member dedication and enthusiasm for protecting the public from fire and electrical hazards.

Our attempts to answer the Committee's questions, however, were hampered by the Department's lack of reliable data and documented policies and procedures. Since there is not enough staff to conduct all discretionary inspections, staff find they must make choices about which projects to inspect, and it is not clear that individual inspector choices around the state routinely support Department priorities. Further, 20 years of piecemeal amendments to DFPEs authorizing statutes have resulted in an awkward patchwork of Department, Council, and Board responsibilities.

Comparing available data with interview results, we are concerned that managers and staff may have some inaccurate perceptions of what is being accomplished. Given better data, DFPEs can do more to ensure that resources are focused on stated priorities.

The Department lacks authority to monitor local enforcement jurisdictions; consequently, lower standards for local inspector qualifications may prevail. Since lower standards may affect the quality of local code enforcement and thereby the public's safety, we recommend the Council determine acceptable minimum standards and if necessary, seek statutory changes.

As a final note, in addition to the questions we addressed in the report, the Management Audit Committee asked us to consider the placement of fire prevention and electrical safety in the same agency. This has been a recurring question since reorganization of state government in 1989.

In other states we reviewed, we found a wide range of placements and degrees of state involvement in fire prevention and electrical safety, such that there is no one best practice regarding organizational structure. Since DFPES fire prevention and electrical safety staff are few in number, and since there is considerable overlap in stakeholders, the current organizational structure appears to be sensible; it lays the groundwork for efficient operations, such as coordinated policy development and joint inspections on the part of fire and electrical inspectors. We see no pressing need to separate the two functions, and we bring the issue forward simply to set it aside.