

Assemblywoman calls for investigation into State Parks

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

Assemblywoman Beth Gaines on Tuesday called for an investigation into fiscal practices at the California Department of Parks and Recreation after the *Bee* revealed an unauthorized vacation buyout program cost the department more than \$271,000.

In a letter Tuesday, Gaines, R-Rocklin, asked the state's Joint Legislative Audit Committee to undertake the probe. The vacation buyout "raises serious concerns about the potential for other waste, fraud or abuse that may be occurring in this department," she wrote.

On Sunday, the *Bee* reported that a deputy director at the Department of Parks and Recreation carried out the buyout program in 2011 without getting approval from the California Department of Human Resources, as required by state law. Due to the state's precarious budget condition, no vacation buyouts have been approved by that agency since 2007.

The secret program, in which employees at parks department headquarters were allowed to sell unused vacation time back to the state, came at the same time the department was planning to close 70 parks to achieve \$22 million in budget cuts.

Details of the buyout program were laid out in two investigations: an internal parks department audit and a follow-up investigation by the state attorney general's office. The *Bee* obtained copies of both investigations from the California Natural Resources Agency, which oversees the parks department.

The name of the official who carried out the program was redacted in the investigative documents, and state officials declined to name him, citing laws that forbid disclosing personnel matters. But numerous sources identified the official as Manuel Thomas Lopez, who was deputy director of administrative services at the parks department. Lopez was demoted in October and resigned in May, according to state officials.

Read the whole story