

Housing audit called 'disappointing'

■ EXAMINATION: The look into the University's family housing found no significant problems

By Laura Kepshire
Higher Education Reporter

A \$105,000 state audit conducted on the University's family housing program found no immediate problems with its management, but did identify a few areas that need improvement.

The Audits Division of the Secretary of State's Office decided to conduct the audit after it received several dozen letters and phone calls from concerned citizens in the fall of 1994 who wanted the University to abandon plans to replace the Amazon Family Housing complex, said Greg Parker, director of administration for the audits division.

The audits division could not change the University's decision to replace Amazon housing, but decided to conduct an audit based on the community's concern and because it felt University housing was a worthwhile

area to examine. The audit, which began last January, reviewed management decisions regarding construction costs, rental rates, maintenance and contracts, Parker said.

"Overall the audit was somewhat disappointing. They spent around 2,000 hours of their time, over 500 hours of my staff's time and it took them over a year to complete it," said Mike Eyster, University housing director. "Afterwards they had a couple helpful recommendations, but nothing worth \$105,000."

The audit compared construction costs at the University with costs at other Oregon public colleges and found University family housing to be more expensive because it experimented with energy efficiency in six of its apartments, Parker said.

Because management spread the costs over all three of the housing complexes the audit found rental rates for all three to be slightly higher.

"That's good management," Eyster said. "The audit makes it look as though they've discov-

ered something new, but this is something any good management would do. We spread that rate out over the 300-400 family housing units and the rates stay stabilized."

The audit found the response time for maintenance on family housing reasonable, but discovered conflicting and incorrect information in the maintenance records. The audit made suggestions for a new system to be created for keeping maintenance requests statistics to ensure the reliability of data, Eyster said.

Because of this, the family housing management has tightened its up-keep of maintenance records by developing a better database management system, Eyster said.

Housing administrators also made an agreement to contract future architects through University contacts instead of through outside sources because of problems with some of the engineers who had worked on renovations for Amazon, Eyster said. University Housing made the decision before the audit was finished, he said.

Money: University of Florida uses program

Continued from Page 1A

can only be applied to schools in Oregon.

"If a parent buys a contract for their child and then their child decides to go to the University of Washington, the parents can get the money back from the contract but won't receive any interest on that money," Courtney said.

Out-of-state students may purchase Oregon tuition contracts but would purchase them at current out-of-state rates, Courtney said.

According to the drafted proposal, contracts are primarily for state institutions but also can be purchased for community colleges and private schools.

Although parents are the most obvious purchasers of the contracts, relatives, businesses and civic groups can also buy contracts.

"Businesses can go and buy 1000 contracts and then just give them out later as scholarships or something," Courtney said. "There are so many ways to use this program."

Seven states in the U.S. currently have some form of prepaid college tuition program. The Oregon proposal was based on the program in Florida, Courtney said.

"Florida has a very broad-based program," he said. "Their contracts can be used at community colleges and state universities."

Opponents to the proposal are concerned that

the contracts will not cover the rising costs of colleges in the future and the colleges and universities could lose money.

"This program is so new, so novel and so powerful it scares people," Courtney said. "But if this is managed well it can really strengthen our higher education system."

At the University of Florida, money from the contracts is invested into a pool. University of Florida officials predict interest from the pool will cover future inflation costs.

The state of Florida started selling tuition contracts in 1988. Since then, it has sold approximately 375,000 contracts and the pool is valued at \$1.9 billion, said University of Florida officials. The number of students using the contracts is expected to peak at the university in 2003.

There are problems with the proposal such as resolving tax issues on the contracts, Courtney said.

The University of Florida is facing litigation by a private bank that provides certificates of deposit and other savings programs for college tuition. Bank officials say any state providing pre-paid tuition contracts can be targeted for violating their patent, said University of Florida officials.

But Florida is only providing contracts for residents and is not violating the patent, University officials said.

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