Auditor calls on Denver Botanic Gardens to improve safety, security

DENVER — The Denver Botanic Gardens needs to improve safety and among other improvements, according to a new audit.

Denver Auditor Timothy M. O’Brien said the audit identified flaws in how the Botanic Gardens ensures a safe environment at its special events and noted some weaknesses in security and information systems that require fixing.

“I hope by pointing out flaws now, the Gardens will act quickly to make improvements and make sure the thousands of visitors every year continue to have positive experiences at one of Denver’s most beloved attractions,” O’Brien said.

The Botanic Gardens agreed to all 25 of the audit’s recommendations and is well on its way to implementing the changes, he said.

“I am pleased Gardens officials were willing to work with us and hear our concerns,” he said. “I look forward to checking back in to see their progress and improvements in the future.”

Specifically, the audit found that there were issues with screening and training volunteers who handle cash and have contact with children. The Gardens cannot prove that it conducted background checks for all volunteers involved in high-risk activities involving children or cash handling at special events like the Blossoms of Light at the York Street location or the Pumpkin Festival at the Chatfield Farms location, according to the document. This, combined with the growth of these events and need for volunteers could add up to a greater concern.

“While we observed volunteers behaving properly, we want to make sure there is no opportunity for future bad actors to join the exemplary team at the Gardens and put visitors and the city at risk,” O’Brien said.

The audit also found that the Gardens had improved efforts to maintain a good relationship with the neighborhood around the York Street location, but it could do more, specifically regarding noise and traffic control.

Lastly, the O’Brien found that there were issues with critical safeguards over information systems, physical access to restricted areas in the gardens and in the Board of Trustee’s governance practices.

The city of Denver owns the majority of the land and buildings at the Botanic Gardens’ York Street location. It has an agreement with the Gardens that requires the city to pay for the water, insurance, utilities and other operational costs. That agreements also specifies that an auditor has the authority to audit the Gardens and assess any risks to the city’s reputation or financial interests.