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Much of 'missing equipment' sitting in Boston highway garage



Photos by Luke Hammill/The Hamburg Sun

Boston Highway Superintendent Robert J. Telaak, left, and highway department worker Mark Chiddy look over a list of missing equipment provided by the Erie County Comptroller's Office. They said much of the equipment is still at the highway garage.

County comptroller stands by report alleging \$1.5 million in equipment missing from town

By Luke Hammill

HAMBURG SUN STAFF REPORTER

Boston Highway Superintendent Robert J. Telaak was shocked last week when he received a list showing that more than \$1.1 million worth of equipment from his department had apparently gone missing.

However, much of the equipment on the list – from Erie County Comptroller Stefan I. Mychajliw, who had released a scathing

report about the Town of Boston's accounting practices earlier this month – was sitting on the grounds of the Highway Department, Telaak said.

"He's the one who wanted to make this [a] big story, only because he wants to run against Mr. [Mark] Poloncarz," said Telaak, who, like Mychajliw, is a Republican. "He can't even be comptroller – talk about county executive."

Mychajliw is reportedly considering running next year against Poloncarz, a Democrat

who won the county executive's job in 2011.

Added Telaak: "I will send Mark Poloncarz a donation if Stefan Mychajliw runs against him."

But in a phone interview, Mychajliw doubled down on the accuracy of his audit, which showed that the town couldn't account for equipment worth \$1.5 million overall and was composed in response to a request from the Boston Town Board.

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COMMUNITY NEWS

Mychajliw: 'We asked ... for specific items and (they) could not be found'

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"I'm not surprised," Mychajliw said. "This happens all the time. People don't like being held accountable, but that's what taxpayers deserve. We specifically asked the Highway Department for specific items and [they] could not be found. It must be a Christmas in July miracle. Items have miraculously reappeared again."

Mychajliw said it was "very sloppy or suspicious that following the release of our report, they [the equipment] magically or miraculously reappeared."

He and Scott Kroll, deputy comptroller for audit, dismissed the idea that the report was political in nature, saying that civil-service employees conducted the audit "with no agenda" and noting that the Boston Town Board requested it.

Town of Boston Supervisor Jason A. Keding, who held a press conference with Mychajliw upon the report's release, said earlier this month that there was no "proof that anybody has done anything wrong" with regard to the missing equipment and attributed the problem to sloppy bookkeeping.

But Mychajliw noted in the phone interview with The Hamburg Sun that his office turned the report over to the Erie County District Attorney's Office, which could investigate if law-enforcement officials are suspicious there was wrongdoing.

Last Friday, Telaak and one of his highway workers, Mark Chiddy, showed The Hamburg Sun some of the equipment that the comptroller's office deemed missing in the audit. Chiddy said about \$460,000 worth of the "missing" equipment was in fact still at the Highway Department, and that another \$500,000 or so worth of equipment was either sold at auction or traded in.

Telaak said the Town Board gives its blessing every time materials are deemed surplus equipment and sold or swapped.

"It's all in the records," he said. "It's all in the board minutes."

One snowplow on the list that represented more than \$117,700 worth of the missing equipment was sitting in the highway garage.

"If it's missing, I don't know what I'm plowing the roads with," said Ken



Luke Hammill/The Hamburg Sun

A 2003 dump truck worth more than \$116,500 and included on an Erie County comptroller's audit earlier this month as missing sits on the grounds of the Town of Boston Highway Department last Friday.

Telaak, the highway superintendent's younger brother and a department employee.

Items from the list that were still on the highway grounds also included a \$69,240 dump truck and another dump truck worth more than \$116,500.

Upon the report's release, Mychajliw said the missing equipment included dump trucks, pickup trucks, excavators, snow plows, a wood chipper, computers, cameras, printers and office materials. He acknowledged the equipment could have been sold or scrapped, or stolen.

"Our auditors were not provided documentation that shows exactly what happened to \$1.5 million in equipment, most of it from their highway department," Mychajliw said at the time.

The Boston Town Board last week approved an update to the town's document-keeping policy in response to the comptroller's report. Keding said at the Town Board meeting that Boston lacked a capital asset disposal process – essentially a simple piece of paper.

Robert Telaak, who has run the Highway Department for 14 years, said at the meeting that the comptroller's office could have gone through old Town Board minutes to see where much of the missing assets went, but Councilwoman Jennifer Lucachik responded by saying auditors were "looking for a form," not simply a Town Board resolution deeming material as surplus equipment.

"This (missing) piece of paper is literally the reason we are having this conversation," Keding said at the Town Board meeting.

Telaak said last Friday that he's "not opposed" to filling out a form and acknowledged that the town may not have documented everything "perfectly." But he said he has talked to highway officials in other towns and that "nobody follows this procedure." He had never heard of an asset disposal form, he added. The equipment on the list dates back as far as 1968.

And though the comptroller's office insists auditors talked to Telaak, the highway superintendent said "not one" of them "ever came and actually talked to me."

"If they would have, we could have told them where it was," Telaak said of the unaccounted-for equipment.

Mychajliw held firm, emphasizing that auditors spent "six extensive weeks in the Town of Boston" while working on the report.

"I wouldn't want those officials in the town organizing a two-car funeral," Mychajliw said, adding that officials from his office have "done our job, and we're moving on." He credited Keding for taking steps to correct the accounting problems.

Telaak feels differently.

"I want an apology for the Town of Boston and my workers," he said.