



**The Domes should evaluate its current admission practices, increase its monitoring of contracts and establish stronger controls, policies and procedures in order to position itself for success in the future.**

**ASD  
HIGHLIGHTS**

**Why We Did This Audit**

The Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors, adopted a resolution requesting that the Director of Audits conduct an audit of the Department of Parks, Recreation and Culture's operations, concessions, and event planning at the Mitchell Park Horticultural Conservatory Domes.

**What We Recommended**

ASD made 19 recommendations that, if implemented, will improve the future of the Domes. Parks management agreed to all of the concerns listed in our recommendations. Key recommendations include:

- *Implement the following recommendations regarding attendance practices including modifications to attendance tracking:*
  - Create a system to ensure the POS system matches Advantage for revenues.
  - Evaluate data from the change in admission price for non-residents and the change from free admissions on Mondays to the First Thursday of every month.
  - Conduct a cost benefit of operating the Domes during Floral Show and Special events only.
  - Evaluate participation in various coupon programs.
  - Modify the Point of Sale system to track zip codes.
  - Evaluate free admission practices.
- *Implement the following items for the Friends and Zilli's agreements:*
  - Immediately require entities to comply with relevant insurance requirements.
  - Clarify the role of Friends in relations to County staff reporting and reimbursement for County staff at Friends' events.
  - Execute the required letter of intent prior to spending from the Milwaukee County Compensation Fund by Friends.
  - Formally approve contract amendments when provisions or conditions change.
  - Require submittal of all required documents.
  - Verify Zilli's paid all applicable sales tax.
  - Investigate and recoup all funds owed to the County through errors in room rental and set up fees.
- *Develop written policies and procedures for:*
  - Event commission from Friends.
  - Sales tax issues.
  - Financial and revenue generating activities.
  - Care of plants and/or trees.
  - Survey procedures.
  - Record retention.
  - Attendance tracking.

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**BACKGROUND**

The Mitchell Park Horticultural Conservatory, commonly known as "the Domes," is located in Mitchell Park on the west side of Milwaukee and is operated by the Milwaukee County Department of Parks, Recreation, and Culture (Parks). In 1967, construction of the current version of the Domes was completed. The Domes have three massive gardens under beehive-shaped glass which are each 140 feet in diameter at the base and 85 feet high offering 15,000 square feet of growing space for plant display. There are three unique themes in the Domes: the Tropical Dome, the Desert Dome and the Floral Show Dome.

The Domes, while operated by Milwaukee County, has two key partners in the operation of the facility: The Friends of the Domes, Inc. (Friends) which provides educational, cultural, recreation and scientific programs along with operating its membership program and Zilli's who provides food and beverage catering services and is primary responsibility for booking of events at the Domes.

In February of 2016, Milwaukee County temporarily closed all three Domes amid safety concerns with falling concrete and debris working loose and falling from high portions of the structures.

**OVERALL OBJECTIVE**

The objective of the audit was to review the operations, concessions, and event planning at the Mitchell Park Horticultural Conservatory Domes. We did this by assessing the admission practices, monitoring compliance of contracts with external partners and reviewed policies and procedures at the Domes.

**WHAT WE FOUND**

- During 2014-2017 82.3% of all revenue at the Domes was from admission fees which limited the Domes ability to generate additional revenue without changes to admission policies and fees.
- Over the four year period we reviewed and according to the data provided by the Domes, admission revenue received during Floral Dome events averages 94.9% of all admission revenue.
- Total attendance for the Domes was 214,372 in 2014, 215,448 in 2015, 92,043 in 2016 and 180,367 in 2017. There were substantial periods of closure in 2016.
- Every person that enters the Domes is counted using the POS System and we found that over the four year period that we reviewed there were 73 unique categories of entry options.
- For every visitor to the Domes in 2014, 2015 and 2017, the Domes collected on average \$3.54 per visitor versus an adult admission price of \$7.00. As shown in the table below, of all visitors from 2014 through 2017, 42.3% visited the Domes for free.
- Increased oversight and contract monitoring efforts are needed by Parks to ensure the requirements of current agreements with Friends and Zilli's are met.
- Domes operations would benefit from comprehensive written policies and procedures along with increased monitoring of sales tax issues including payments.

