



PRESS RELEASE

Friday, March 13, 2026

OTA Public Relations

Contact: Lisa Shearer-Salim

405-425-2849 | <https://pikepass.com>

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Press Release #006-26

OTA responds to false statements regarding recent audit report

The Oklahoma Turnpike Authority is providing an official response to the investigative audit released on March 4, 2026, by the State Auditor and Inspector's office.

OTA takes the audit seriously and appreciates the diligent work of the State Auditor and Inspector's Office, especially the way the audit helps the public understand the authority's processes for bond issuance, property acquisition and shared services with other state agencies. OTA also welcomes a future performance audit as it strives to continually improve its processes to best serve Oklahomans.

Furthermore, in the 9 days since the audit was released, OTA has implemented improved staff training regarding documentation processes in answer to several recommendations from SAI.

Since investigative audits do not allow the audited agency to see the audit ahead of time, or provide responses prior to publication, OTA is doing so now.

Read OTA's response at

<https://pikepass.box.com/s/8kxreq0shbyo0tjrp0nvy5us5jy1gwd8>

Press Conference and Media Clarifications

Unfortunately, several statements in Auditor Byrd's March 4 press conference were misconstrued in the resulting media coverage and need to be addressed:

- **Design engineering consultants are not handpicked by OTA's executive director.** In a story about the audit, a reporter for a statewide publication falsely

stated that former OTA Executive Director Tim Gatz hand-picked the ACCESS Oklahoma consultant program manager months before his son went to work for that same contractor. This is patently false and in fact the reporter failed to reach out to OTA or SAI to clarify who the report was referencing as demanded by journalistic standards. Contractor selections follow the process established by state law and are done by a selection committee using a specified rubric of criteria to make a recommendation to the chief engineer. When the committee made the choice in 2022, Director Gatz was not on that committee. There was no wrongdoing in the selection of the ACCESS consultant program manager and implying otherwise is without merit.

- **Design consultants do not name their own price when awarded contracts.** OTA's in-house engineers engage in extensive negotiations with selected consultants to arrive at an agreed upon scope of work, including hourly rates, and not to exceed contract amounts. To date, OTA's engineers have saved \$25 million on the ACCESS Oklahoma program when you compare proposals from consultants to the final negotiated contract amount.
- **OTA does not have a "blank check" to issue bonds.** OTA can only issue bonds to construct new turnpike projects or significant improvements to existing turnpikes. OTA can only issue bonds to construct new turnpike projects first authorized by the Oklahoma Legislature and have been in the case in the ACCESS Oklahoma bond program.
- **OTA cannot raise tolls without oversight.** While OTA has statutory authorization to fix and revise tolls, they cannot do so without agreement from an independent traffic engineering consultant. The consultant also does a traffic and revenue analysis. This process ensures that any change in rates will not negatively impact OTA's ability to make its debt payments and ensure that an increase in tolls would not divert traffic from the turnpike network.

Investigative Audit Clarifications

Several recommendations in SAI's audit regarding consultant selection, consultant cost management, use of subcontractors, contracts with the Oklahoma Highway Patrol, and policies surrounding surplus property sales do not accurately reflect the scope of OTA's oversight of these areas and deserve additional clarification. The attached response outlines OTA's existing processes and procedures. This document has been provided to SAI and shared with the Governor, Senate Pro Tem, Speaker of the House, State Treasurer, Attorney General, Secretary of Transportation and the OTA Board.

###