

Poor Board Governance Leads to a Sad Christmas for Tree Farmers

A recent article (October 13, 2018) in the New York Post reported on an investigation of the Christmas Tree Farmers Association of New York. The mission of the Christmas Tree Farmers Association was to raise awareness of the Christmas tree industry and increase sales. They have received \$970,000 from the state since 2013, and have a grant for \$625,000 that runs until 2021. It appears that the nonprofit's mission failed due to stiff competition from trees brought in from Canada and North Carolina.

The state of New York has started subpoenaing the nonprofit's records this year following up on reports of misuse of funds. The investigation has found that the marketing budget for the nonprofit has been funneled to a PR firm that was run by the association's executive director, Mary Jeanna Packer. The nonprofit also funneled almost 40 percent of the organization's revenue to the executive director's Ghostwriter Communications firm. The executive director's business took a total of \$302,662 from 2014 to 2017.

A board member commented, to investigators, that he sought to find other vendors; ironically the board member quit in 2015, probably eliminating any chance the organization had of walking the straight and narrow. The rest of the board members lacked the knowledge to oversee the group in the first place, making it a prime target for the executive director to funnel funds to herself.

So far, the investigation is still ongoing, but the state inspector general has found that the group lacked knowledge and that work should be competitively bid. Further, the Department of Agriculture and Markets stated that it would require more details from the association on its spending.

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<https://nypost.com/2018/10/13/state-probes-christmas-tree-nonprofit-for-stocking-pr-firms-coffers/>