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\$300,000 gone from prepaid accounts at cemeteries

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A state audit has found that more than \$300,000 is missing from more than 450 prepaid accounts at Mount Hope Cemetery in Belleville and Valley View Cemetery in Illinois, according to a spokesman for Illinois Comptroller Daniel W. Hynes.

The money went missing from the cemeteries' trust funds, which are set up to maintain money people have paid for pre-arranged burials, over the course of a little over three years -- from May 2005 to July, according to the comptroller's spokesman, Alan Henry.

At the center of the investigation are 84-year-old Columbia, Mo., resident Hillman Crowell, who bought the cemeteries in 2005 and in recent months weathered criticism for his poor maintenance of the cemeteries' grounds, and the previous owners, who, when they bought the cemeteries in 2002, said they would restore missing funds and spruce the places up.

A summary of the state's audit, released to the News-Democrat on Thursday, said that the cemeteries' ownership illegally changed hands in February; Crowell transferred them back to Forever Illinois Inc. without letting the state know, according to the audit summary.

Crowell said Thursday that he was aware the state was auditing his business that owns the cemeteries, Mid-America Growth and Development Corp., but he said the state office hasn't notified him of any problems, and he maintains that he still owns the cemeteries and never gave them back to the previous owners.

Crowell's right to operate Mid-America was revoked by the Illinois secretary of state last year because he didn't file an annual report or pay his franchise tax.

Brent Cassity, who is registered with Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White as the president of Forever Illinois Inc., couldn't be reached for comment.

The report by the comptroller's office indicates that Forever Illinois Inc. was the company that previously owned the cemeteries; Henry said that's what the company is currently called.

News-Democrat stories reported a different company name at the time; they said Brent and Tyler Cassity previously ran the cemeteries as part of St. Louis-based Forever Enterprises.

The Cassity family owned several funeral homes and cemeteries in Missouri as well as the Hollywood Memorial Park Cemetery in California, where many movie stars are buried.

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported in June that Forever Enterprises' affiliate, National Prearranged Services Inc., of Clayton, Mo., was being investigated in several states for possibly losing millions of dollars in prepaid funeral money in several states. The newspaper reported that regulators found irregularities in how the money was invested.

The Cassity brothers in 2002 paid \$120,000 for Mount Hope and \$135,000 for Valley View. They also said they would put \$200,000 into an escrow account to make improvements and repairs, reimburse the state -- which had taken over the cemetery before they bought it -- the money paid to consumers who were cheated, and pay \$227,000 to restore perpetual-care funds.

Comptroller Daniel W. Hynes has turned his office's findings over to the St. Clair and Madison counties' state's attorneys' offices for possible criminal charges, Henry said.

St. Clair County State's Attorney Robert Haida said Thursday he plans to request further investigation by the Illinois State Police in Collinsville.

Madison County State's Attorney Bill Mudge could not be reached for comment Thursday.

Henry said the comptroller's office is preparing to revoke Mid-America's license to sell prepaid services. He said Forever Illinois Inc. doesn't have a license in Illinois to sell the services.

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