

\$19,000 payday for little work

Tory MLAs paid for membership in Idaho-Alberta task force

Archie McLean

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EDMONTON - A pair of Tory MLAs received more than \$19,000 for their membership on an international task force that did little or no work, documents obtained by The Journal show.

Calgary MLA Cindy Ady, the associate minister of tourism promotion, received roughly \$11,500 and Little Bow MLA Barry McFarland got about \$7,600 for their membership on the Idaho-Alberta Transboundary Task Force.



CREDIT: supplied
Ady, left, McFarland, right.

They were appointed to the task force in 2005 by Premier Ed Stelmach, who was then International and Intergovernmental Affairs minister.

But the task force -- which has an odd name since Alberta and Idaho don't share a border -- held only one informal meeting during the MLAs' paid stint, which lasted until 2006.

There is no documentation that the government members did any work whatsoever.

Both Ady and McFarland say they did some work -- just not the kind that gets recorded.

Ady said she worked to create "relationships" between the two governments, but refused to provide meeting minutes, agendas, phone records, dates, names of Idaho colleagues or anything else to back up her assertion.

"They were not formal record meetings and I don't need to share that with you," Ady said Friday.

"I just need to tell you that I was in charge of making sure that we had a good relationship with Idaho."

McFarland also failed to provide evidence of his work.

"I was appointed to the IAT Task Force to become familiar with the issues, to stay up to date on them and to work with the department, not just to hold meetings," he said in an e-mail.

Opposition critics said such an explanation is not good enough.

"This is a taxpayer ripoff plain and simple," said Alberta Liberal Leader Kevin Taft.

"Taxpayers shouldn't have to pay for work that wasn't done."

NDP Leader Brian Mason called the affair part of a "culture of entitlement," from a government that has been in power for too long.

The task force was established in 2000 to enhance trade relationships between the two jurisdictions. It held its first meeting in 2001 as part of the Pacific Northwest Economic Region meeting in Whistler, B.C.

At that point, no MLAs were paid for their membership on the body.

According to government documents, which were obtained under the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, "relations between Alberta and Idaho experienced a period of inactivity thereafter due to scheduling difficulties, staffing changes in Idaho, frustration with lack of progress on some fronts ... and a lack of focus on both sides."

Ady and McFarland were officially appointed to the task force by Stelmach in March 2005. They each received just over \$500 per month retroactive to January 2005.

By July 2006, documents show the task force had still done no work, despite paying Ady and McFarland more than \$17,000 combined.

"The relationship has languished," the documents say.

"Both sides agree that the existing agreement, which established a formalized annual consultation structure, has not functioned all that well and that we should consider something less formal... ."

McFarland was removed from the committee in April 2006 when he was named to cabinet. It was disbanded altogether at the end of November 2006 by Gary Mar, the minister at the time.

According to the documents, the only work the task force did was hosting an Idaho delegation that came to Alberta for a conference in July 2006.

A spokesman for the premier admitted the task force didn't do much in the end, but they had good intentions and tried to set up meetings with their American counterparts. "Can I show you a report, an agreement, a memorandum, anything? No, I can't. It just isn't there," David Sands said.

John Nordstrom, with the Idaho Department of Commerce, referred to the group as the Idaho-Alberta Sister State Task Force.

He said the state politician who sat on the informal committee didn't receive any extra compensation.

"It was just part of their normal job. There wasn't any extra pay or anything."

In 2005-2006, Alberta MLAs received a base salary of \$71,244 per year, but critics have often complained that government members are awarded committee memberships and other perks to top up their salaries.

All 62 Conservative members were paid more than \$100,000 in salary and extra cash from committees or cabinet.

Ady received roughly \$39,615 for sitting on five committees, while McFarland got even more. Both Ady and McFarland stressed that they do a great deal of extra unpaid work for the government.

They may have done good work on the Idaho task force, said Scott Hennig, a spokesman for the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, but without documentation it's impossible to judge.

"It's not good enough just to say 'trust us,' " he said.

"It's pretty tough for taxpayers to take that on blind faith."

amclean@thejournal.canwest.com

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