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SUN NEWS Alberta

Tue, November 20, 2007

Flap over \$500-per-hour consultant

By JEREMY LOOME, LEGISLATURE BUREAU

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The government is paying a Calgary consultant \$500 per hour to help it develop its new utilities commission, the Opposition revealed yesterday, and has already shelled out \$84,000 for work on the project.

Energy Minister Mel Knight hasn't explained yet why the department's own staff can't do the work or why the contract, awarded to Calgary consultant Murray Nelson's firm Mana Energy Group Ltd., wasn't publicly tendered, said Hugh MacDonald, the Liberal energy critic.

"It's another indication of how disrespectful this minister is to his own staff, because two weeks ago he referred to them as 'minions' and he's totally wrong," said MacDonald.

Knight said Nelson was hired because his expertise ensures the job will be done properly, but refused to discuss tendering the contract.

"It would be my understanding that the individual that's being spoken about is, indeed, very, very knowledgeable with respect to the industry and the utilities system in the province of Alberta," Knight said.

CONTROVERSIAL

The new utilities commission is controversial for several reasons, chief among them being the government's decision to sharply limit who can intervene in a hearing before it under the proposed Bill 46. Instead,

have you called Jenny yet? (Image of Jenny Holzer)

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most Albertans will be represented by a consumers' advocate appointed by the government.

"Five hundred dollars per hour? Does that really represent good value for the taxpayers?"

MacDonald asked. "That's \$4,000 per day. "

Nelson, who is the former head of the Alberta Electrical Systems Operator - the arms-length agency that polices the deregulated energy market - said it's up to the government to defend its decision.

"I think you're better to ask the Department of Energy," he said.

"I'd just as soon just say that they made the decision, and they must have seen sufficient value, and I feel I produced it.

"But I really can't comment beyond that."

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