



Monday » November
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Liberals hammer Maskell with new contract queries

Former Tory MLA upset at attempts to smear him

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EDMONTON - For the second day in a row, the Liberals went after the government in the legislature over questionable contracts given to a former Tory MLA.

In 2006, Bob Maskell billed the government \$600 for what appears to be a single meeting with local MLA Thomas Lukaszuk.

The Liberals also raised questions about Maskell's invoicing practices, which show several days in which he billed more than 24 hours of work.

"This is how governments get into serious trouble," Liberal Leader Kevin Taft said. "Sloppy contract administration done for an insider. It's a recipe for real trouble."

On Tuesday, the Liberals tabled documents showing that former Aboriginal Affairs Minister Pearl Calahasen personally requested that Maskell get a government contract just days after he lost his Edmonton Meadowlark seat in the 2004 election. The move was cleared at the time by the provincial ethics commissioner, but an e-mail exchange between ministry staffers shows they were concerned about the political perception.

Since then, Maskell has completed a number of contracts for the government, mostly in the area of aboriginal affairs and education.

In 2006, Lukaszuk said he met with Maskell on several occasions to talk about acquiring land near Fort Edmonton for an aboriginal history centre. They met, Lukaszuk said, for as short as 30 minutes and as long as a half day.

"I don't know what his billing practices and rates are, but he did spend time with me alone on a number of occasions, he did spend time with the mayor, he did spend time with the river valley alliance and economic development and others," Lukaszuk said.

Maskell said Wednesday there's a simple explanation. He met with Lukaszuk, then continued working for the rest of the day. He said he's upset the Liberals have been trying to smear his name.

"It bothers me when somebody is trying to make it look like you're feeding at the trough," he said.

Maskell will consider changing the way he does invoices, but says it's never been an issue until now.

On another occasion in the autumn of 2005, Maskell seemed to bill the government for 50 hours in a one-day period. But Maskell said the 50-hour day actually took place over a three-day period. During that time Maskell drove almost 1,200 kilometres and participated in a celebration and conference with southern Alberta aboriginal groups.

Taft said he would like to see the work Maskell did spelled out more clearly on his invoices. "We shouldn't have to use our imagination," Taft said.

Since the legislative session began last month, the Liberals have tried to paint the Tories as a corrupt and fading regime.

In the past week alone, they have raised concerns about questionable lottery grants and so-called secret water deals between the government and developers of a mega-mall near Balzac.

Premier Ed Stelmach's political appeal is based largely on his reputation as an advocate of open and transparent government. The Liberals believe they can poke holes in that image if they continue to hammer away at ethical issues in both the recent and distant past.

Stelmach notes his government has introduced a number of transparency initiatives, including putting government flight logs and expense accounts online and establishing a lobbyist registry.

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