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Province's lunch tab nearly \$2,000 a day

Government picked up check for more than \$700,000 in catering in 2006

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EDMONTON - The Alberta government spent more than \$700,000 -- or nearly \$2,000 per day -- in 2006 to provide sandwiches and treats for meetings involving its staff and often "stakeholders."

Alberta Environment had one of the largest appetites of all ministries, gobbling up more than \$82,000 worth of sandwiches, according to the public accounts of expenditures for the fiscal year.

A spokesman said the department orders food when "hosting meetings and staff meetings with stakeholders and the like."

Alberta Education spokesman Terrence Harding, whose department spent more than \$50,000 on catering, said it's a necessary expense.

One of the issues for Alberta Education is to build and maintain relationships with teachers and school board trustees and food is served at most gatherings because they are often held over the noon hour or after regular working hours, he said.

"We have to feed them or provide some kind of refreshments for them, and there's quite a number of meetings over the course of the year."

Since many "stakeholders" are from out of town, the government would be on the hook for their meals regardless, he said.

"It's a better use of time and resources to provide some kind of nourishment while they're here."

But Liberal critic Hugh MacDonald, who chairs the all-party public accounts committee, says the amount spent on lunches for bureaucrats looks bad when some schoolchildren go hungry.

"Certainly if we can afford that kind of money for lunch, I cannot understand why we're so reluctant to fund school lunch programs where they're needed," he said Tuesday. "I don't know how we can say no to school lunch programs when we see fit to spend that kind of money to feed ourselves."

Sheila Rich of Upper Crust Caterers says the provincial government and University of Alberta make up about two-thirds of her business, while private

companies such as law and accounting offices and software companies make up the rest.

For the second straight year, the company she started 25 years ago garnered the most Alberta government business -- about \$145,000 in 2006 -- according to the public accounts.

Her biggest government customer was Alberta Environment, which spent \$36,000, but she delivered sandwiches to 21 different departments for meetings of between four and 25 people.

"I know a lot of people feel the money the government spends is excessive, but I make no judgment on that," Rich said. "I have a daughter who works for the government and she works pretty darn hard. I certainly don't see much waste."

While her menu offers a variety of gourmet dishes, Rich said the department officials she deals with are pretty cost-conscious, and she primarily provides basic sandwiches.

"I am pretty careful about taxpayers' money myself. They are conservative spenders," she said.

"As to whether anybody should have lunch on the taxpayers' money, that's not for me to decide. It's a free lunch, but I think it means they have to stay and work."

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LUNCH MONEY

Here are the caterers used most commonly by the provincial government:

- Upper Crust Caterers: \$144,867
- Sunterra Quality Food: \$129,116
- Mercers Fine Foods: \$84,621
- A Cappella Catering: \$79,756
- Quick Bite Catering: \$38,505
- Peppercorn Deli: \$32,356

Source: Government of Alberta

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