

NEWS

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Gov't taking over trail grooming

Liberal leader Yvonne Jones opposing actions against Labrador Winter Trails

JONATHAN RUSSELL

Northern Pen

The Department of Labrador and Aboriginal Affairs is using Labrador Winter Trails' financial woes to force the group to relinquish control to the provincial government, Opposition Leader Yvonne Jones says.

In a statement read to the House of Assembly Dec. 17, Minister John Hickey noted the provincial government, through the Department of Labrador and Aboriginal Affairs, increased the Labrador Transportation Grooming Subsidy by \$150,000, with an additional \$200,000 budgeted for trail improvements.

The subsidy has been funding operation and maintenance of groomed trails on the north and south coasts of Labrador for several years, but because of financial difficulties, Labrador Winter Trails wants to pass over its responsibilities for trail grooming to the provincial government, according to the statement.

Ms. Jones said that's false.

"My conversations with members of Labrador Winter Trails tell me that they were forced out by the government and Minister Hickey and his department - that wasn't an option that they chose, they were told," she said, adding it's a "power trip" by the provincial government.

"We've got a Department of Labrador Affairs that's got no files, no responsibility and nothing to do, so they're creating work for the minister and his staff, and it seems like they're looking to pick up bits and pieces wherever they can to try and make a department work."

Labrador Winter Trails encountered financial problems when one of its groomers broke through the ice on the north coast, while two other groomers, stationed in William's Harbour and Norman Bay, broke down.

The cost to repair the groomers was too much, and as a result the organization went over budget.

Mr. Hickey's statement said his department offered to assist Labrador Winter Trails with its debt.

Ms. Jones said that was offered early last year.

"I'm disappointed that the government does not see fit to help them pay for those maintenance costs," Ms. Jones said. "They had originally committed to giving them an \$82,000 grant towards it - and that was seven months ago - and the Labrador Winter Trails still has not received their money that was promised them.

"They're being forced to sell off their assets to pay for the groomers," she added.

The provincial government is prepared to co-ordinate trail grooming this winter and will provide funding to Inuit Community Governments and development agencies, Mr. Hickey said, adding a request has been made to Labrador Winter Trails to allow access to the necessary trail groomers, purchased with public funds, to ensure vital transportation linkages are maintained for isolated communities.

"To date, Labrador Winter Trails has not accepted this offer," Mr. Hickey said in the statement. "This arrangement would allow Labrador Winter Trails to better focus on its core mandate of promoting tourism and recreational snowmobiling and collecting trail pass fees."

Ms. Jones disagreed.

She fears the provincial government will mismanage the trail system, taking funds away from the tourism aspect.

"That causes me some concern, because I think that because (the trails were) done by volunteers and it was done by the people themselves, it had a lot more value and there was a lot more ownership in that process," she said. "It's enabled us to have a full trail network from L'Anse au Clair right to Labrador City that we could market for winter tourism in Labrador, so it was much more than just a transportation link - a vital link for some communities without roads - but it was also a tourism commodity as well."

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