

Ministerial statement called an ultimatum by opposition

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A ministerial statement read in the House of Assembly Wednesday was criticized by the opposition for being more of an ultimatum to the group that grooms trails in Labrador.

Just before question period, government ministers get a chance to read statements in the House which are typically notices of achievement or the launch of a new program.

But when Labrador Affairs Minister John Hickey rose to update the House on the Labrador Transportation Grooming Subsidy, both opposition leaders criticized Hickey for the tone of his statement.

Hickey said Labrador Winter Trails Inc. ran into financial difficulty and no longer wants to be responsible for grooming trails.

He said the province has offered to help the company with its debt if it allows community groups access to their groomers and doesn't sell the groomer used between North West River and Separation Lake.

"Our offer to pay back outstanding debts incurred by Labrador Winter Trails is still on the table, providing they do not proceed with this sale," he said.

"I strongly encourage Labrador Winter Trails to reconsider its position so that groomers that were purchased with public funds are made available for the public good."

But Liberal Leader Yvonne Jones said Labrador Winter Trails legally owns the groomers and the government can't tell it what to do with its assets.

Jones said the company has no other choice but to sell the groomer to cover its cost overruns.

She said if insurance isn't paid by Friday, every groomer in Labrador will be pulled off the trails.

She also disputed Hickey's claim that the company doesn't want to groom the trails anymore and accused the government of trying to take the service from it.

"This is the same government that made a commitment seven months ago to pay \$82,000 to this organization and they have yet to see the cheque," she said.

"I was really quite surprised to see the content of (this) minister's statement," said NDP Leader Lorraine Michael.

"I think the minister has used the House to make a political point against an organization."