

April 8, 2010

To: Michel Robillard, Vice President, Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency
Patrick Borbey, Assistant Deputy Minister, Northern Affairs, INAC

I wish to communicate my extreme unhappiness with the responses I have received so far to a request for information from the Yellowknife offices of your agencies.

I recently became interested in the Deh Cho Bridge, currently under construction here in the NWT. I had two conflicting pieces of information; an INAC press release from 2004 announcing a \$3 million contribution to the Deh Cho Bridge Corporation, and information from the NWT Department of Transportation indicating that only \$1.8 million had ultimately been provided. I thought this would be a simple matter to resolve, and sent an email to Trish Merrithew-Mercredi, the current incumbent of the INAC Regional Director-General position in Yellowknife given as the contact in the press release. She passed me along to Jodi Woollam, the Senior Communications Advisor.

In a couple of follow-ups over the next three weeks, Ms. Woollam's responses ranged from "may have to go through Access to Information", to "files being requested to Ottawa". I finally got what seemed to be a couple of carefully worded sentences that did little to resolve my original question, and a referral to Kimberly Fairman, NWT Regional Director of CanNor, whose agency I was told was now handling the program. I'm not sure why this wasn't apparent when I first made the request, but c'est la vie, and I awaited Ms. Fairman's response.

This turned out to be nothing more than an instruction to file an Access To Information Act request. When I questioned the need for this, I received a follow-up reply. Other than a specious aside about my motives, the gist appeared to be that she would be unable to deal with my request except as an Access matter, seemingly as a matter of policy.

I strongly reject this idea. I have no personal experience with the Act, but some quick research seems to confirm my belief that this should be a last resort, not a replacement for normal requests, and that departments are encouraged to resolve requests outside the Access framework wherever possible. I'm willing to accept that there might be circumstances of which I'm unaware that somehow are blocking the answering of my request; but in that case it should be possible to indicate this and

provide the general nature or category of the difficulty. Ms. Fairman's (or NorCan's) position seems to some combination of "We refuse to provide an answer, refuse to say why we refuse, and invite you to attempt to compel us", and the notion that a formal access application is necessary to evaluate requests in the first place. This is

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hardly in the spirit of open and responsive government and public service that I, and hopefully you, would wish to see.

To sum up, I feel I've made a reasonable request for a specific piece of information, regarding simple clarification of an amount of public funds, previously announced. I'm mystified by the hoops and contortions this has generated, and don't know if I've stumbled into some issue I'm not aware of, or if this is just an awkward attempt at avoiding any involvement with a topical matter.

I've included copies of the email correspondence, and the final outline I provided Ms. Fairman. In case I'm being unrealistic in my assumptions, I'll attempt to consult with others who might reasonably be expected to have more experience in these sorts of matters, and who may be able to assist in my further education.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. Please feel free to contact me if there is anything that can be done to resolve this situation or for further information.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

Attachments:

Email correspondence from this request
Final enclosure to Ms. Fairman

CC: Kimberly Fairman, Regional Director, CanNor Yellowknife
Trish Merrithew-Mercredi, Regional Director General, INAC Yellowknife
Jodi Woollam, Senior Communications Advisor, INAC Yellowknife

CC: Access to Information and Privacy Coordinator, Department of Justice
Office of the Auditor General Of Canada, Ottawa

CC: Earl Blacklock, Manager of Public Affairs and Communications, NWT Department of Transportation

CC: Dennis Bevington, Member of Parliament, Western Arctic
David Ramsay, Member of the NWT Legislature - Kam Lake, Yellowknife

CC: Lee Selleck, CBC News, Yellowknife
Bruce Valpy, Managing Editor, Northern News Services