

Payment approved in utility scrap

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DARCY HENTON
Journal Staff Writer
EDMONTON

The Alberta Utilities Commission has tentatively approved a \$35-million payment to the Alberta Electric System Operator to compensate AltaLink for expenses incurred in a transmission line hearing that was aborted as a result of a spying scandal.

Commission spokesman Jim Law says the regulator will still hold hearings this fall to consider consumers should pay that tab, which is expected to start appearing on electricity bills next month.

"The commission concluded it was in the public interest for the AESO to provide an interim refund as soon as possible," Law said. "Nonetheless, this is an interim settlement, which can vary pending the outcome of the full process, a decision which is likely to come this fall. The process leading to this decision opens all facets of the application to scrutiny under the hearing process."

AltaLink, the company initially selected to build the line from Wabamun to the Calgary area, had applied to recoup its costs last year in the wake of a decision to declare the hearings for the 500-kilovolt line "a mistrial." The process was aborted in 2007 in the wake of revelations that the regulator had hired private detectives to eavesdrop on landowners opposed to the project.

In a decision last fall, the commission directed the AESO — a non-profit agency appointed by the provincial government to plan electrical transmission — to pay those costs to AltaLink.

But Liberal MLA Hugh MacDonald and other critics have slammed the decision. They say consumers shouldn't be on the hook for the flawed process, and it was premature to make the payout when AltaLink has been again selected to build the line from Wabamun coal-fired power plants to Calgary.

"All along the attitude is, regardless of what we do, we can just pass the cost onto the monthly bills of consumers," MacDonald said Friday. "The consumer is just treated like a cash machine here."

He said there must be full disclosure regarding what the money was spent on and why AltaLink is entitled the \$35 million now, when it is still doing similar work on a similar line.

"Before any of this \$35 million is allocated, AltaLink must show where these bills were incurred."

Joe Anglin, who heads the Rimbey-area landowners group that blew the whistle on the spies, said the decision to pay AltaLink must be reversed.

"It's not right," he said. "It's not just."

His landowners group, the Lavesta Area Group, plans to file an application with the commission Monday to have the decision reviewed and overturned, he said.

The group also plans to buy radio advertisements to press their demand for a review.

Anglin said the landowners group was not properly notified about the hearing into AltaLink's application to recoup the \$35 million.

dhenton@thejournal.canwest.com