

THE HILLTIMESonline

Bureaucrats spent \$19.6-million on out-of-office retreats in last two years. Expenses included retreats or executive meetings at the Royal Ottawa Golf Club, coastal resorts, Mont Tremblant and Whistler ski resorts, and health spas, House documents show.

By TIM NAUMETZ

Published November 23, 2009

Federal bureaucrats included country clubs, casinos, resorts, and luxury hotels among the sites they selected for \$19.6-million worth of retreats and out-of-office meetings over the past two years. The luxury expenses included bookings for retreats or executive meetings at the **Royal Ottawa Golf Club**, coastal resorts, the **Mont Tremblant and Whistler ski resorts**, health spas, and marinas, according to documents the government tabled in the *House of Commons*.

The majority of meetings and conferences held away from government buildings were booked with well-known economy hotel chains across the country, a 1,000-page report itemizing the expenditures shows. In those cases, public servants reported modest business meetings, training sessions, or encounters with the public on a range of departmental responsibilities.

But the report also lists dozens of retreats for managers and employees at secluded inns, country clubs and tennis clubs along with meetings at top-flight hotels such as the **Pan Pacific** in Vancouver, the **Fairmont Chateau Laurier** in Ottawa, and the **Fairmont Chateau Montebello** on the Ottawa River near the capital.

The report covered the fiscal years from April 2007 to April 2009 and included only room rentals in most cases, not meal costs or lodging. Some agencies appear to have included meal costs.

Locations included **the Marshes Golf and Country Club** near Ottawa, **the Hilton Lac Leamy**, a luxury hotel that is part of the Lac Leamy Casino complex near Ottawa, the *Willows Golf and Country Club* in Saskatoon, **the Nordic Spa** near Ottawa, Banff, Alta., and the *Temple Gardens Mineral Spa* in Moose Jaw, Sask.

In one case, government employees in Winnipeg who held a board meeting at the Club Regent Casino explained the site was chosen because it was "too hot in our building." The same agency held nine meetings and two retirement dinners at the casino for a total cost of \$9,158.

NDP MP Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, Man.), whose party requested the information from the government, said the expenditures on resorts and expensive clubs is unacceptable, particularly

in the current economic environment. "I think the taxpaying public would blow their stack if they thought that they were paying for public sector golf junkets," he said. "Professional development seminars are one thing, but why are they at luxury resorts and golf courses and marinas?"

The Canadian Commercial Corporation (CCC), a Crown corporation that arranges contracts between Canadian defence firms and the U.S. government and also with developing countries, spent \$92,604 on executive and management retreats, including meals and lodging.

Six of the retreats were held at **the Chateau Montebello**, where Prime Minister Stephen Harper (Calgary Southwest, Alta.) hosted former U.S. president George W. Bush and Mexican president Felipe Calderon in 2007. The cost for the six retreats came to \$50,600.

Another retreat the same Crown corporation held at **the Mont Tremblant ski resort** ran up a tab of \$19,796. It had another nine retreats at the **Fairmont Chateau Laurier** in downtown Ottawa and two at the secluded **Wakefield Mill** in the Gatineau Hills north of the capital.

The Bank of Canada held several retreats during the two-year period. When it halted the practice in 2008, it had to pay \$9,354 in cancellation fees for room space alone to the Sam Jakes Inn near Ottawa. The Canada Deposit Insurance Corporation put on an "employee conference" for 81 people at **the Marshes Golf and Country Club** near Ottawa at a cost of \$2,250. It spent \$9,560 for a "senior management session" at **Mont Tremblant** and another \$1,100 for a "strategic planning session" at **Hilton Lac Leamy** beside the casino.

The Foreign Affairs Department held more than two dozen meetings at the **Chateau Laurier**, as well as sessions at the **Hilton Lac Leamy**, the waterfront *Pan Pacific Hotel* in Vancouver and a meeting that cost \$600 at the **Lone Star Cafe**.

A branch of Health Canada held a retreat in Whistler at a cost of \$7,425, while Farm Credit Canada had meetings at the *Wascana Country Club* in Regina, the *West Haven Golf and Country Club* in London, Ont., and the *White Oaks Resort and Spa* at Niagara-on-the-Lake.

The Human Resources department spent \$3.3 million, largely for public sessions, and Health Canada spent a total of \$2.4 million. The CBC spent a total of \$3.2 million renting space, but explained the expenses included costs for production sites and that a detailed breakdown could not be provided.

Management of the cash-strapped National Gallery held two meetings at the **Nepean Sailing Club** at a total cost of \$1,190. Marie Lugli, a media official with the gallery, said the cost included room rental and catering, but no alcohol. Ms. Lugli said the meetings were held away from the gallery "due to the requirement for minimal distractions" and that the club's recreational facilities were not used.

Pierre-Alain Bujold, a Treasury Board spokesman, said government policy on hospitality stipulates "departments and agencies must use government-owned facilities when these are appropriate and available." Mr. Bujold said one example of the need for off-site space would be the absence of a room large enough to accommodate all employees. But the head of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation was not in a mood to accept excuses.

"Taxpayers work hard to pay their taxes," said federation national director Kevin Gaudet. "They can't afford a vacation, let alone a glitzy one."

news@hilltimes.com The Hill Times