

State puts hold on contract with NDOT liaison

By Sean Whaley, Nevada News Bureau

CARSON CITY – A 23-month, \$280,000 contract approved by the Nevada Department of Transportation for a private sector individual to work as a liaison between the agency and contractors seeking work has been put on hold because of concerns expressed by Gov. Brian Sandoval and other members of the NDOT Board of Directors.

The contract with William “Buzz” Harris to serve as an ombudsman between the agency and bidders on contracts was approved by the agency in September, but NDOT Director Susan Martinovich said it will be put on hold while concerns raised at the board meeting this week are resolved.

The board was told the \$280,000 is the amount that can be spent on the services provided by Harris from August through June 2013, but is not guaranteed. Harris, who was selected after a request for proposals was issued by the agency, would be paid \$100 an hour under the contract, which would include most of his expenses.

But Sandoval, who serves as chairman of the NDOT board of directors, noted the potential contract cost is well in excess of what even he earns as governor.

Other members of the board also raised questions about the contract, including Lt. Gov. Brian Krolicki, who said such positions are usually filled internally by an agency rather than bringing in someone from the outside.

Attorney General Catherine Cortez Masto, also a member of the board, asked for information about who submitted proposals for the contract.

“My understanding is historically and traditionally an ombudsman position is contained within the respective department, and that person would have an encyclopedic knowledge of the operation,” Sandoval said. “With an external ombudsman, that person will in turn have to get a hold of somebody who is within the office to perhaps respond to those questions.”

There are a lot of unanswered questions that need to be answered in regard to the contract, including the cost, he said.

Harris is a former assistant executive director at the Nevada Associated General Contractors.

Assistant Transportation Director Richard Nelson, said the purpose of the contract is to provide a problem solver and facilitator for contractors seeking to do business with the agency. Harris has a good working knowledge of the contracting business and NDOT, he said.

Reporting on the success of the program to NDOT is part of the contract as well, Nelson said.

“There is a lot of nuance to dealing with the department,” he said. “And a lot of times these new contractors don’t know what questions they should be asking. And we don’t want to see any contractor go under because they get balled up in the bureaucracy.”