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Ticket contracts `help cut taxes'

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Government-run public venues like B.C. Place Stadium and the Pacific Coliseum continue to grant exclusive contracts to ticketing agencies to keep down costs to taxpayers, said an assistant to tourism minister Bill Barlee.

Mike Geoghegan was responding Monday to a complaint by Umeeda Switlo, president of Community Box Office, who said Ticketmaster forces consumers to pay high service charges by monopolizing ticket sales through exclusive contracts with venues and promoters.

Switlo approached the B.C. government in 1993, questioning whether this kind of contract is in the public interest.

At the time, she received a reply from Premier Mike Harcourt, stating that the issue of granting exclusive contracts was of concern to the government.

Geoghegan said that as minister responsible for the B.C. Pavilion Corp. and the Pacific National Exhibition, Barlee has moved to open the door to other ticketing agencies under the philosophy that competition is good.

``Ticketmaster had an exclusive contract for all B.C. Pavilion Corp. venues," said Geoghegan. ``In November 1993 that changed ... in response to concerns expressed by Switlo."

Since then, the corporation's only venue for which Ticketmaster holds an exclusive contract is B.C. Place Stadium. At the corporation's other venues -- Vancouver Trade and Convention Centre, Robson Square Media Centre, Bridge Studios and Fraser Valley Trade and Exhibition Centre -- the group putting on the function chooses the ticket distributor.

The corporation puts the stadium contract out to public tender, said Geoghegan, adding that it goes to a proven company that provides quality service.

``The company pays for the right to exclusivity," he added. ``If we had ended that overnight, we would have had to make up a revenue shortfall."

``It's for ease of operation," said corporation president and CEO Warren Buckley of using only one ticketing company. ``We were looking for a fair amount of security" for the hundreds of thousands of dollars involved, he added.

Ticketmaster pays the corporation an annual fee and an amount per full-priced ticket sold, said Barry Smith, the corporation's senior vice-president. He was not immediately able to give exact figures.

``It's an industry practice and you'll find what we're doing is not unusual," he added.

He was not able to say whether other companies who put in a tender would have keep service charges lower for consumers.

Switlo said Ticketmaster charges up to 33 per cent of the face value of tickets, while CBO charges a flat 10-per-cent charge with a maximum of \$3.50 per ticket.

Shirley Nutbrown, the PNE's general manager, said that since earlier this year, Ticketmaster holds the exclusive ticketing contract for advance sales of reserved-seating tickets. The contract was also publicly tendered.

This type of ticket applies mostly to Pacific Coliseum shows, she added.

“There are at least three sites that anybody could operate,” she said, referring to the Empire Stadium, Aqua Stage and the Agridome.