

State paid Aboriginals \$7m for gas hub talks

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EXCLUSIVE

Taxpayers paid almost \$7 million to the Kimberley Land Council under a deal to consult traditional land owners over possible sites for a gas processing hub on the coast.

The Liberal-Nationals Government yesterday confirmed to *The West Australian* that the KLC received the money in two instalments in February and June under a financial agreement with the former Carpenter government.

Colin Barnett has blamed the Carpenter government's delays in finding a site for the gas hub for the decision by Japanese company Inpex to build a \$25 billion gas plant in Darwin rather than the Kimberley despite its gas field being located off the WA coast.

Industry sources have also told *The West Australian* that in addition to the \$7 million, the KLC was also paid \$3.5 million by Inpex as part of negotiations over a site.

Opposition Leader Eric Ripper yesterday defended the former government's payment to the KLC, saying it helped it to conduct a "massive consultation process". He admitted most of the \$7 million would have been spent on legal fees and meetings which brought together traditional land owners from across the Kimberley.

In response to questions from *The West Australian* yesterday, the KLC said traditional owner task force members, representing 14 native title claimant groups, were paid \$350 a day for their work and "expert advice" during the meetings. The KLC selected four

possible sites for the processing hub in September after eight months of consulting traditional owners.

The announcement came less than three weeks after speculation first broke that Inpex had chosen Darwin over WA.

Last month, the Premier, who described Labor's handling of the matter as appalling, named North Head as his preferred site for the gas precinct in the Kimberley. He also scrapped the right of veto the former government had promised traditional owners.

He said the right of veto had contributed to WA losing the Inpex plant. And in a veiled swipe at the KLC, Mr Barnett

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said that to some extent the people negotiating on behalf of Aboriginals had "overplayed their hand".

KLC executive director Wayne Bergmann said yesterday his group had met all timelines and budgets as part of its agreement with the former government.

He said the council was independently audited and all funding, including its deal with the previous government, was declared in its annual report.

Mr Ripper said while he refused to disclose the amount paid to the KLC in April, he had at the time committed to make all the costs associated with the process available once a site was chosen.