

Rural power users balk at dam costs

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Three power companies in rural Southern Nevada, which get much of their energy from Hoover Dam and whose rates may be affected by \$65 million worth of cost overruns at a tourist attraction there, want more than just a report that blames bureaucrats.

They want a signed contract or legislation that will stop those same bureaucrats from hefting the financial burden onto their customers' backs.

"I know what their (government's) best efforts can do regarding spending money," Overton Power spokesman Kent Bloomfield said Tuesday. "I don't know what their best efforts can do when it comes to saving money or finding other sources of revenue."

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation released an internal audit Monday, finding that its employees grossly underestimated the costs of the Hoover Dam visitor center and garage. A report by the U.S. inspector general's office reached a similar conclusion last year.

The government estimated in 1983 that the visitor center and garage, built into canyon wall, would cost \$32 million. Today, the total rings in at \$123 million.

Southern Nevada power users, as well as those in California and Arizona, agreed in 1983 to pay for the cost of the visitor center. Power users - led by those in the rural Southern Nevada towns of Overton, Logandale, Pioche and Pahrump - however, balked when the cost quadrupled.

This week's report says that the bureau will attempt to keep the power users' portion of the costs to the originally agreed upon amount, which is now \$58 million when adjusted for inflation. The remainder is supposed to be paid for through Hoover Dam parking, tour and concession fees.

"If we can't pick up those additional revenues ... then power users will have to," said Bob Walsh, spokesman for the bureau's Boulder City office.

That possibility is spurring representatives from the Southern Nevada power companies to continue to lobby the state's congressional delegates for a more binding agreement with the government.

Bloomfield hopes that a congressional investigation into the cost overruns - requested last by Nevada's two senators - will prompt Congress to pass legislation requiring the bureau to pay the \$65 million difference.