

State's Jet Purchase Is Off, But Can We Get Back The Deposit?

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State officials are scrambling to recover a \$250,000 down payment after canceling an order for a new \$9 million jet.

Gov. Mike Easley on Wednesday ordered the N.C. Department of Commerce to scrub the deal after reporters asked about the Cessna Citation jet, called the Encore+. The reversal came during a week in which Easley told agencies to prepare for a 3 percent budget cut.

"A plane is not necessary," said Easley spokeswoman Sherry Johnson. "It's not going to be purchased in this economy."

The Commerce Department's mission includes trying to lure companies to build plants and create jobs in North Carolina. They use both an airplane and a helicopter to take company representatives around to prospective locations. The department was trading up from its current King Air propeller plane to the jet.

Money for the eight-passenger plane was included in last year's state budget, but the contract wasn't made until summer.

Republicans criticized the planned purchase -- and the potential loss of \$250,000 -- as expected mismanagement from a Democratic administration.

"If it was wrong when the media found about it, it was wrong before the media found out about it," said Jack Hawke, senior adviser to Charlotte Mayor Pat McCrory, the GOP candidate for governor. "It's part of the culture of secrecy that covers up these things and wastes taxpayer dollars."

Secretary of Commerce Jim Fain dispatched a memo to the Department of Administration, which handles all purchases and contracts, late Wednesday asking them to deep-six the deal. He also asked that the deposit be refunded.

Efforts to reach Cessna to see whether it would give back the state's money were unsuccessful.