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## Nothing bad about trips, chamber says

*Officials dispute analysis by residents over funding*

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**SPRINGDALE** — Officials with the Chamber of Commerce said Tuesday there's nothing wrong with rewarding volunteer salesmen with exotic trips to Turkey, Tahiti, Spain and Mexico — as long as they've earned it.

And there's nothing wrong with depositing public funds into an unrestricted account alongside private dollars raised through membership dues and sponsorship drives, the officials said.

Responding to questions raised by Springdale resident Anita Davis about expenditures on dining and travel, chamber President Perry Webb, along with past and present board chairmen, defended chamber practices while denouncing Davis' compilation of expense reports as biased and inaccurate.

"We're not doing anything wrong," said Webb. "Anita [Davis] has compiled numbers to tell a story she wanted to tell."

According to Davis' report — created with information culled from three Freedom of Information Act requests — the chamber spent \$306,175 on travel and \$144,388 on dining in the last three years.

What Davis did not put in her report, Webb said, were the requisite revenue streams that paid for trips to New York, the Bahamas and Hawaii. Such trips are handed out as rewards for volunteers who raise big cash by selling sponsorships for programs offered by the chamber, said Webb.

"I knew they'd say that," said Davis, referring to what she describes as an excuse for abuse of the travel budget.

Brian Moore, chairman of the chamber's executive board in 2008, was one of the chamber's volunteers. Moore worked on a commission basis for what the chamber called the Total Resource Campaign. After four years of fundraising, he was given his 15 percent commission in the form of two trips.

Moore, who got married on May 20, 2006, flew to Tahiti two days later, chamber records show. A year later, chamber records show, Moore flew to Istanbul, Turkey.

Moore had no apologies for the trips. He'd earned the vacations by bringing in money for the chamber, he said.

"The people who raised the money are getting a commission on what they raised," Moore said.

Davis said she filed the requests for information because she wanted to know how public funds were being spent. The city pays the chamber \$100,000 from the general fund, \$60,000 from the advertising and promotion fund, and \$17,000 from the industrial development account.

There is no separation of public and private funds. Tuesday, chamber officials said they have no reason to change the way money is deposited and spent. Most importantly, the city does not require the chamber to have a separate accounting for public dollars, and, also, creating a new accounting system would be expensive and time-consuming, said Sam Fiser, the chamber's auditor.

"If the City Council were really worried about [how public money is spent], they'd have guidelines in the contract," said Fiser.

Last year, Alderman Kathy Jaycox proposed a new contract that would have required changes in the chamber's accounting of public funds. Under Jaycox's proposal, the chamber would have had to have submitted quarterly reports that included an itemized list of expenditures. The city would then reimburse the chamber for eligible expenses.

The Jaycox proposal, however, died because of a lack of support.

Davis said she was angry that the chamber has never been forced to provide an itemized accounting of how public money is spent. In response to the collapse of Jaycox's proposal, Davis said she and about 20 others finally decided to pool money, file the requests for information and hire accountants to review the financial documents. Davis said she was chosen as the group's figurehead because, "I have broad shoulders. I can take the licks."

The accounting firm of Ervin and Co. reviewed the report compiled by Davis and her team. She declined to identify the people who contributed to the effort.

Davis said after looking at the records, she's convinced Webb is not doing his job. Trips to places like Miami, Mexico, New York and California did not result in new business coming to Springdale, said Davis, and too much money was spent on dining and entertainment.

Rather than give money each year to the chamber, the city instead should hire a fulltime economic development director to sell Springdale to investors. Davis said she hopes the information obtained through the Freedom of Information Act will force people to rethink Webb's role in Springdale's efforts to recruit businesses.

"I'd like to see the chamber board conduct an investigation," she said. "I'd like to send Perry Webb packing and hire an economic development director with Springdale's best interest at heart so we can see results."

John Lea, a former chairman of the chamber's executive board, strongly disagrees.

"We have nothing to hide and not a damned thing to apologize for," Lea said. "When [Anita Davis] challenged the integrity of the chamber, she challenged the integrity of a lot of people."