

SPRINGDALE

Resident queries tabs of chamber

\$300,000 in travel raises questions

RICHARD MASSEY ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

A Springdale woman is questioning hundreds of thousands of dollars spent on travel and dining by members of the Springdale Chamber of Commerce and wants the organization to account where public money is being spent.

Anita Davis filed a series of state Freedom of Information Act requests seeking expense reports dating back to 2006 from the chamber, which is funded by private donations, membership dues and annual grants from the city.

The chamber annually receives \$177,000 in public funds — \$100,000 from Springdale's general fund; \$60,000 from the Advertising and Promotion Commission; and \$17,000 from the Public Facilities Board.

Davis' request includes documents identifying \$306,175 in chamber travel expenses — including trips to Tahiti and Istanbul, Turkey — and \$144,388 for dining from 2006 through early 2009.

Chamber President Perry Webb and at least one member of the chamber's executive board said they will meet with reporters Tuesday to discuss Davis' request for information. Webb declined to comment for this article.

Mayor Doug Sprouse, a member of the chamber's board of directors, said the report Davis compiled is incomplete because it doesn't include revenue reports. Without a complete report, it's not fair to question the chamber's spending of public funds, he said.

Under agreements with the city, the public grants are earmarked for economic development. But John Ervin, an accountant Davis hired to review the financial documents, said the chamber funds are co-mingled, meaning public and private funds go into the same account.

“The evidentiary information provided to us was insufficient to support any conclusions by us regarding these expenditures,” wrote Ervin in a letter. “Further detailed examination of the underlying source of documents would be required to determine the nature of the expenditures.”

Without a division between public and private funds, the chamber cannot prove that tax dollars weren’t used to pay for trips, Davis said.

The city would be better off if it stopped giving money to the chamber and instead hired a full-time economic development director who would be directly accountable to the mayor and City Council, she said.

“I can sit back and see what’s being done [by the chamber] — nothing,” said Davis.

Sprouse said revenue from private sources could have been used to pay for trips to such places as Amsterdam, Netherlands, Barcelona, Spain, and Cancun, Mexico.

Sprouse, however, said it might be a good idea for the chamber to establish a separate accounting system for its public funds.

“That would save everyone a lot of questions,” he said.