

Monday, October 5, 2009

## Times Editorial

# The message matters

## Springdale chamber should consider accountability

Springdale resident Anita Davis filed multiple Freedom of Information Act requests not long ago with her city's chamber of commerce. The results of that inquiry suggests that, in the past three years, the private pro-business group has spent large on travel (\$306,175) and dining (\$144,388) expenses. Considering the Springdale Chamber of Commerce receives \$177,000 annually in public funds from the city of Springdale — and has formed a habit of sending volunteers to exotic locales as a way of saying thanks — chamber leaders may have a situation on their hands.

For example, there's Brian Moore, chairman of the chamber's executive board in 2008. He was once a chamber volunteer doing work on a commission basis and was rewarded handsomely with a trip to Tahiti (two days after his wedding three years ago) and to Istanbul, Turkey. He denies any wrongdoing. So does chamber President Perry Webb.

Kathy Jaycox, an alderman, tells us she has no reason to believe illegal activity of any sort has taken place. Neither do we. But a troubling aspect, as Davis sees it, is that there is no accounting for how the public portion of the chamber's funding is spent. Late last month Springdale chamber officials said they have no reason to change the way their money is deposited and spent. And the city officials who have handed over that money — no doubt for economic development purposes — have set no standards of accountability to require it.

This annoys Jaycox, who put forth an ordinance proposal in 2008 that would have forced several important changes, including the submission of quarterly reports and providing an itemized list of expenditures. However, that idea died for a lack of support.

Expect her to bring it up again.

"On behalf of my constituents, I've heard over and over again that we don't see much value here through our chamber of commerce. It's been frustrating to me to see. Whatever they do with their own policies and procedure — that's their money." By comparison, it's the mixing of public and private funds that gets under her skin.

"My father was in advertising," she says. "There was a clear accounting that dad and his partners always had to do when they were serving clients. It was calculated and quantified. That's my point of reference. I can't believe the same can't be done here."

Fayetteville Chamber President Steve Clark says that in Arkansas it's pretty typical for chambers to receive public funding. Then again, until last week, Fayetteville had gone nearly a decade without receiving financial aid via City Hall. He says a standard of transparency will be a part of that relationship — including a separate bank account for public funds, separate audit numbers, and so forth. "What we'll do is account for all the money we spend, if any. But our idea is to keep it totally segregated."

Springdale chamber officials claim that a new accounting system would be expensive and time-consuming. They also angrily charge that their integrity has been challenged. Perhaps — but, then again, a debate over this topic would not be unfolding right now if only Webb were willing be more publicly accountable with public funding. Perhaps not a single public dime was spent on those stylish overseas trips. Of course, the trouble is that with no clear, concise accounting practices in place, we're left to simply wonder. We can't help thinking taxpayers deserve better.

Hey, if any chamber of commerce wants to spend its members private funding on lucrative trips to reward fundraising performance, that's their business. What's important is how taxpayer dollars are spent. And it's generally a bad idea to simply respond with a "trust us" when someone asks about the public funding.

### Who writes the editorials?

The editorial board determines the viewpoints expressed in our editorials. Its members are Publisher Jeff Jeffus, Editor Greg Harton, Managing Editor Christie Swanson and Editorial Page Editor Scott Shackelford.