

SUNDAY, APRIL 20, 2008

Springdale Cowbirds Have No Shame



Springdale Chamber of Commerce President **Perry Webb** felt no shame as he requested that the new \$51,000 GMC Yukon Denali be granted a property tax exemption. It would save the Chamber from paying \$519 that would go mostly to public schools. Why not? After all, the County Equalization Board granted them a property tax exemption on the Chamber's 4,182-square-foot building back in 1997, so why not go to the trough for a free ride on their shiny new gas guzzler? Only suckers have to pay taxes.

The Chamber's sense of entitlement to special treatment and tax exemptions failed to convince the Washington County Assessor, who denied the request on the mammoth SUV. "It's not public property or used exclusively for public charity," they were told. No kidding?

Now their over-reaching on the Yukon Denali exemption could result in the Chamber having to start paying taxes on their plush offices as well. The Fayetteville Cowbirds paid \$4,135 in property taxes on their Mountain Street building right next to City Hall, but the Springdale Chamber didn't pay a dime for the last ten years. They should have been paying about \$4,200 a year.

Granting these preferential tax exemptions -- whether it be the Chamber's fancy office suites and flashy SUVs or Jay Cole's airplane hanger he says is a chapel -- has consequences for other taxpayers, Jewette Farley, former president of the International Association of Assessing Officers, said, "It creates a big-time problem, because it forces everybody else to pay more taxes."

Webb said two things that are very revealing about how the Chamber operates. He and two other chamber officials made the request for exemption from paying taxes at the Equalization Board meeting on September

9, 1997, and it was immediately granted without any questions. "It lasted a total of about 30 seconds," he said. "It was just boom, boom, boom."

The other point Webb made was that the other area Chambers that do have to pay taxes go along in a conspiracy of silence. Those that pay property taxes know better than to complain, because it will draw attention to those that don't, Webb told a reporter. "I didn't know Fayetteville was paying. It's been a conscious decision that you just don't bring it up."

The Springdale Chamber has proven itself to be of the genus *molothrus* -- which is Latin for "just another parasitic **Cowbird**." The working stiffs in our county pay taxes on their mobile homes and aging pickups, grumbling but knowing that it supports our schools and local governments. The Springdale Chamber has shown about as much interest in supporting local public schools as they did about continuing Featherfest or speaking up for saving one of the town's few historic landmarks from becoming a parking lot.