



HOW WE SEE IT

Less Room For Doubt In Springdale

As a reward for good performance, it's hard to beat a trip to an exotic location. It's the kind of motivation that could turn a good salesman into a fabulous one. Doesn't Hawaii and the Bahamas sound pretty good right about now?

This is how the Springdale Chamber of Commerce has chosen to repay its top volunteer salesmen in years past. One lucky fellow received a trip to Tahiti, then a year later, a trip to Istanbul, Turkey.

That's all well and good. There was just one pertinent question that seemed difficult to answer: Who was paying for these trips — the chamber or the public?

You see, most of the chamber's revenue comes through membership dues and donations from private businesses. But the city of Springdale also pays \$177,000 annually, including \$100,000 from the general fund, \$60,000 from the advertising and promotion fund, and \$17,000 from the industrial development account. And up until now, the chamber has accepted all of that money — public and private — without accounting for which dollar came from which source.

The city of Springdale pays the chamber for economic development services, which clearly benefit every resident. Less clear is how a trip to Tahiti for one salesman (albeit a deserving one, no doubt) benefits the rest of the town.

This issue flared up a few months ago after Springdale resident Anita Davis filed multiple Freedom of Information Act requests at the chamber. Results of that inquiry suggested that in the past three years, the chamber had spent \$306,175 on travel and \$144,388 on dining expenses.

Chamber officials seemed astonished that anyone would question their accounting practices, and some saw it as a challenge to their integrity. They said that the city does not require them to separate public funds from private, and besides, creating a new accounting system would be expensive and time-consuming.

But Davis wasn't the only one urging the chamber to change its ways. Even Mayor Doug Sprouse suggested in September that changing the system would be wise. "That would save everyone a lot of questions," he said.

That's precisely the point. There's no reason to question the chamber officials' integrity at this point, because there's no evidence of wrongdoing. Still, their accounting practices leave room for questions — questions that can be easily put to rest.

That's why we cheered Chief Executive Officer Perry Webb's recent announcement that starting in 2010, the chamber will segregate city funds from its other funds, the same thing that other chambers of commerce in our area do.

Webb said he could argue that everything the chamber does and spends money on can be related to economic development. We might even buy that argument.

But for any organization that receives public dollars, a good rule is to err on the side of openness and complete accountability. Anything less tends to plant seeds of doubt in the public's mind about that organization's ethics. The Springdale Chamber of Commerce finally got the message: It's the appearance of the thing that matters.