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Gift of public funds? Can't have that!

By Dennis McCarthy

Wednesday, August 04, 2004 - Leave it to those subversives on the West Hills Neighborhood Council to try and compromise the high ethical standards of the city of Los Angeles.

They had the audacity recently to try and spend \$850 of taxpayer money on \$50 U.S. Savings Bonds for 17 West Hills elementary schoolchildren who were awarded first prize in an essay contest on how to make their neighborhoods better.

Yeah, I know. I thought the whole idea behind these neighborhood councils was to make things better, too.

The brain trusts at DONE -- the city's Department of Neighborhood Empowerment -- which doles out \$50,000 annually to each of the city's 86 neighborhood councils, including 26 in the Valley -- said the savings bonds constituted a "gift of public funds," and thus violated state law.

Thank goodness somebody at DUMB, uh, I mean DONE, was awake at the switch. Can you imagine the havoc a subversive idea like handing out savings bonds to kids trying to help their neighborhoods would cause if it spread throughout the city?

Thousands of young schoolchildren might turn off the TV, and put away their skateboards for a few hours to give it some thought, then write an essay about their neighborhoods for a \$50 savings bond. And some of those ideas might actually be implemented and make the city better.

What a misuse and waste of public funds that would be. Kids actually getting involved in something positive on the public's dime.

We have programs costing thousands of tax dollars a year for them when they screw up, but we can't float them a \$50 savings bond when they do something good.

That would be a gift of public funds. A no-no.

"When you get youth engaged in spirited, academic things like this, I think the whole community gets a big return for its tax dollar," says Evan Morris, chairman of the youth and education committee on the West Hills Neighborhood Council.

"That's all we wanted to do, spur young schoolchildren to talk about their neighborhoods and tell us how they would make them better."

Children like Justice Street Elementary School fourth-grader Sarah Saidoff, who wrote about improving her neighborhood by helping clean up the streets, looking for lost dogs and having anti-tobacco and -drug rallies.

"I want to keep the city, state, country, continent and the whole world clean, safe, and healthy," she wrote.

Big job, Sarah. The least we taxpayers could do is say thank you with a \$50 savings bond.

The guy saying no is Greg Nelson, general manager of DONE. Some people say he's the bad guy of the story, but maybe he's just a bureaucrat caught between a rock and a hard place.

The reason other city departments, like Cultural Affairs, can hand out taxpayer money for grants and prizes is they are doing it for programs designed specifically for that purpose, Nelson says.

"It has to be specific, such as Public Works awarding a cash prize for city beautification," he said. "The money for our program is specifically earmarked for operating expenses and neighborhood improvement projects. That's it. My hands are tied.

"I would love to see funds to buy savings bonds for the kids permitted, but the auditors would be all over me. I'd be raked over the coals by people saying you can't do this with public funds.

"If the City Council wants to go ahead and pass a motion that it's OK, I'm all for it. And if someone wants to raise funds privately to award the kids these savings bonds, I'll be the first one to contribute."

Well, Mr. Nelson, get out your checkbook. The West Hills Property Owners Association stepped up this week to finish the job the city couldn't or wouldn't.

"They agreed to fund the entire purchase of the bonds for the kids because they saw the value of the essay contest, and what it accomplished," said Ed Youngblood, vice president of the West Hills Neighborhood Council.

Now all we have to do is get the City Council to see the value of it, too.

Councilman Dennis Zine said Wednesday he's planning to introduce a motion to see what can be done to loosen the restrictions on the neighborhood council funds.

"It's ridiculous because these kids deserve to be rewarded for writing those essays," Zine said.

Exactly.