

Bonus for elected officials is service

Well, spring has sprung and two persnickety perennials, weeds and greed are back. The Board of Supervisors, tenders of our little piece of paradise known as Solano County, wisely weed-whacked one garden killer before it could take root: bonuses for elected officials. Some astute supervisors questioned how those seeds all-most germinated. Weeds of greed come from failing to lead. They are inherent to human nature.

Coincidentally in the news, a teachable American moment is playing out. Senior Veterans' Administration officials received enormous bonuses in the context of an embarrassing level of performance while veterans who served us all went without even being looked at. Only a few years ago, the VA was much ballyhooed for instituting a five element "balanced scorecard" for senior executive bonuses. They forgot the sixth element — human nature.

Last year, the living large lifestyle and bonus package of Solano County's highest paid public official was the subject of a Daily Republic report. Your grand jury, at www.solanocourts.com, named the boondoggle the "Money in Pocket" program. Today, county managers who meet expectations can get a bonus of 2.5 percent of their salary. Non-elected directors can get bonuses up to 15 percent of their base salary. Over 90 percent did.

Objectively measuring and financially rewarding senior leadership



Kevin Ryan

performance is like trying to wrestle with Jell-O; it may taste good to those who get the biggest bite but in the end, but it's a sticky business best left alone. In the tortuous world of baseball statistics, complex measurements lead to gazillion-dollar decisions. Baseball is a game with measurable, simple outcomes. Public leadership is not.

Those in positions of leadership and senior management must use judgment, wisdom, discretion and experience for the benefit of others. That challenge is a bonus. Dangling delectable dollars in front of leaders is a quick doorway to darker sides of human nature wherein the talented, powerful and privileged might misbehave. Nikita Khrushchev said, "Politicians are (all the) same. They promise . . . bridges even where there is no river." Although this is a satirical view, incarcerated Congressman Cunningham reminds us that bonuses build bling-laden boats for rivers that only politicians may paddle.

Are there underpaid public servants? Absolutely! City council salaries are ludicrous and certainly they are not alone. Is it not wiser however, to raise the standards and then raise the salaries? In Solano County, how foolish is it to let the man with "mine-ing" rights to a cookie jar he was already too familiar with dole out the dispensations?

Bonuses, characterized as "nuanced" by one supervisor, for attendance and "non-constitutionally

mandated duties" are impressive sounding rationalizations. If you offer a bonus incentive to those in leadership, you are acknowledging that money is the best reward; the giver is not getting what they wanted and also suspects they will not get it otherwise. You can not "pimp out" professionalism while acquiescing to mediocrity. You do not give bonuses to senior professionals to do that which they are expected to do.

Furthermore, suggesting the non-elected dole out bonuses for the elected is not merely a conflict of interest but a conflagration of idiocy. What next, ring kissing and a return to plenary indulgences? Let's see, I'll take two favorable tax assessments, an unduly influenced audit or piece of legal advice to go, and oh yea, hold the integrity.

Leading and managing the public trust wisely is a never-ending bonus that fills the coffers of one's conscience with the compounded interest of citizens served. It garners a check-and-balance government rather than officials with big check balances. The weeds of greed and exploited power will always invade our gardens. Performance-based bonuses to senior leaders, elected or not, is a Faustian fertilizer whereby exchange of services comes dangerously too close to an exchange of virtue ultimately at the taxpayers' expense.

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