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City officials weigh on whether businesses should sponsor public programs

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By [Esther Zuckerman](#)

Monday, September 20, 2010

After budget cuts claimed both the New Haven holiday tree and the Fourth of July fireworks in the city's 2010-'11 fiscal year budget, local businesses stepped up to save the popular events. Now some aldermen are asking why local businesses can't do the same for other city programs.

"We've learned something here," Ward 7 Alderwoman Frances "Bitsie" Clark said recently. "Perhaps we should be looking for sponsors before we spend taxpayers' money."



YDN

Local businesses have stepped up to save popular events, like the lighting of the city's holiday tree.

City Hall officials said taxpayers should pay for basic services in the city, but some residents think the city can look for more private businesses to help fund other programs.

For instance, Ward 23 Alderman Yusuf Shah, who chairs the aldermanic finance committee, suggested that extracurricular activities for city youth could be sponsored by city businesses.

Chief Administrative Officer Robert Smuts '01 said the city often has sponsors for cultural events, such as concerts or festivals, there are certain services it is not willing to ask private entities to pay for. Street lights is an example, he said.

"That's not something that we are comfortable doing," he said. "That's privatizing something that is really government service."

Jeffrey Kerekes, one of the lead organizers of activist group New Haven Citizens Action Network, said non-profits can take over some public functions. Doug Hausladen '04 of the Downtown Wooster Square Community Management Team said a Board of Aldermen-appointed panel, of which he was a member, discussed outsourcing the city's HIV-prevention needle exchange program to a non-profit organization.

"There are city departments that are doing the same things as state agencies or private non-profits," Kerekes said.

Sponsors should not be paying for basic city amenities including police or fire services, street paving or sidewalks, Shah said.

That said, the city regularly asks the Greater New Haven Chamber of Commerce to help fund programs such as Youth@Work, which teaches work skills to city youth. But the city does not have a huge corporate base or many headquarters.

New Haven's three major employers are Yale University, Yale-New Haven Hospital and the Hospital of Saint Raphael, which all engage in philanthropy, Smuts said. University Associate Vice President for New Haven and State Affairs Michael Morand '87 DIV '93 wrote in an e-mail Sunday that the University contributes to events like the International Festival of Arts & Ideas in the city.

"As in the case with scores of cities across the country, the largest employers in New Haven are universities and health care institutions, so they are more prominent in their sponsorship than they might have been 25 or more years ago when New Haven, like every other city, had more hometown banks and corporations," Morand said.

And the city does reach out to the corporations in New Haven, Smuts said. For instance, the IKEA store near Long Wharf had signed on as a three-year sponsor for the Fourth of July fireworks even before the fireworks were cut, said the store's manager, Gail Franc. The store was a sponsor for the previous year's fireworks but stepped forward with a large donation in 2010 only after the city said it would cut the event.

Smuts said the major contributions to bail out city programs "really only happen when its clear there is no capacity to have the city pay for it."

Michael Casparino, the president of Northern Connecticut for People's United Bank, the company that stepped in to save the holiday tree, said corporate sponsors only know about a chance to give when there is a high-profile problem. People's United Bank contributed \$20,000 for the tree.

"You figure there is never a problem about it," he said.

Tony Rescigno, president of the city's chamber of commerce, said it is not at all uncommon for the city to look for sponsors, but most businesses have seen sponsorship as an opportunity to advance themselves as well.

"There is a limit to how much you can ask the corporation community to do," Rescigno said. "[One has] to

make the case beneficial to corporate community as well.”

The budget was approved by the Board of Aldermen in May.

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