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Contractor's city work, Trinity 'dream team' post spur more controversy

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A nonprofit that raises private money to fund amenities and major projects for Dallas' Trinity River corridor redo financially backed a \$105,000 city contract last year "in exchange" for the City Council's awarding the work to a particular contractor, according to city records.

An executive with that Philadelphia firm, Wallace Roberts and Todd, was named months later to a panel of experts. The group was billed as outsiders who could re-envision Trinity Parkway unencumbered by political strife and bureaucratic complications surrounding that toll road.

City officials and civic leaders on Wednesday said that Trinity Trust Foundation does not control how City Hall awards contracts related to the Trinity River Corridor Project, which includes plans for lakes and recreation areas. They said awarding WRT a contract to develop renderings and estimated costs of potential lakeside amenities saved money because the firm had experience on the park project.

WRT principal Ignacio Bunster-Ossa and former City Manager Mary Suhm said that he was later tapped for that private panel because of his landscape architecture expertise and knowledge of the park plans.

“The team was made up of individuals with strongly held values and standards within their disciplines, and no one individual of a particular design discipline exercised undue influence [over] other professionals,” said Suhm, who helped put together Trinity Parkway’s “dream team” of experts and frequently advises chief Trinity project supporter Mayor Mike Rawlings.

But critics of how the city has managed the massive river project, which also includes the toll road, said the situation highlights how unknown donors and a few civic leaders have large influence over the landmark project.

“If the goal is to have the people of Dallas get the amenities they want, this doesn’t seem designed to get their opinions, their wants and their needs,” said City Council member Philip Kingston. “It’s more designed to get the opinions of the few.”

In a related matter, Larry Friedman, an attorney for City Council member Scott Griggs, says Griggs is being targeted by a felony coercion investigation as political retaliation for his helping bring to light how City Hall has handled the corridor project and the WRT contract.

Voters will decide Saturday who will get seats on the council that will determine the toll road’s fate and help shape the massive park.

Not ‘great wording’

The council resolution regarding WRT said the city was accepting Trinity Trust’s grant “in exchange” for giving that firm the job. Sarah Standifer, the city’s interim Trinity watershed management director, said Wednesday that was not “great wording.”

Standifer said Trinity Trust wanted renderings and cost estimates to raise private money to fund construction of more amenities around the lakes. Those include a spray park, skate park, picnic area and playfields. The city has the money for lakes, but not surrounding recreation areas or landscaping features.

When asked why Trinity Trust didn’t give the money from unnamed donors to WRT, Standifer said she doesn’t know if the nonprofit typically awards design contracts. She said the city tapped WRT because picking a company that hadn’t helped with previous park plans would have cost more money.

Bunster-Ossa’s firm designed the Continental Avenue pedestrian bridge that opened over the Trinity River last year. That is one of several large-scale projects that Trinity Trust has helped fund or subsidize with the tens of millions of dollars it raises. Standifer said even though the nonprofit financially contributed to the pedestrian bridge, it did not pick the construction contractor.

Trinity Trust donates only to the park planned alongside Trinity Parkway, not the toll road. Foundation president and executive director Gail Thomas was traveling Wednesday and was available only briefly as she boarded a plane.

“Private donations go to keep the Trinity Center open and to fund city amenities – bridges, lakes, trails and parks — in the Trinity,” she said.

‘Ripe for abuse’

Kingston said the city’s reliance on nonprofits for funding leaves residents in the dark. He said not knowing who provided Trinity Trust with the \$105,000 demonstrates a lack of transparency and accountability on one of the most ambitious public projects in city history.

“It’s ripe for abuse,” Kingston said. “We don’t understand the relationship between the proposed contractor and the grantor.”

Kingston said the city could be more transparent by opening all work to bids from any company. He called Bunster-Ossa’s later appointment to the dream team “cozy.”

Kingston obtained thousands of internal City Hall emails about the toll road and park projects last month. Included in the documents were emails between Bunster-Ossa and city officials.

Other emails were detailed in an April story in *The Dallas Morning News* about how Trinity Parkway supporters tried to strategize about mounting opposition and how Rawlings relied on former and current officials for information about the project even as he served as a chief champion of it in public.

Griggs helped Kingston obtain the emails April 13. That’s the same day Griggs is accused of threatening Assistant City Secretary Bilirae Johnson over whether or not a special meeting about Trinity Parkway had been publicly posted correctly.

Griggs is not charged with a crime, but a grand jury is investigating whether he committed a third-degree felony. He has denied wrongdoing and released polygraph results indicating he did not threaten Johnson.

Griggs supporters have pointed to the eight days it took for the incident to be reported to police as a red flag that the investigation was political. They have not accused anyone of orchestrating the investigation but have said Griggs got on the wrong side of the city’s top leaders.

Police records omit the names of several witnesses to the alleged incident and do not make clear what prompted the investigation. Johnson declined to say whether she called the police or if they approached her. Dallas police would not answer any questions about the case, nor would District Attorney Susan Hawk’s office.