

Don't be intimidated

Contra Costa Times editorial

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GOVERNMENT GRANT money should be allocated to the best projects to meet the needs of a community. Political connections should not be a criterion. And funds should not be handed out to those who threaten and intimidate.

That's why the behavior of community activist Saleem Bey and his followers in their pursuit of a \$175,000 North Richmond grant is unacceptable.

As Richmond Councilman Nat Bates aptly put it, "Unfortunately, people feel that they're entitled to it. Some people feel like if you can do enough intimidation you get what you want." But, "We can't just give money to people to spend the way they want."

In this case, there are clear procedures to ensure that money is properly spent to meet the needs of the community, a poverty area of about 5,000 residents that includes part of the city of Richmond and adjacent unincorporated territory.

The money comes from a mitigation fund created when permits were issued for the West Contra Costa Sanitary Landfill transfer station. The money is to be used to clean up and improve the neighborhood.

A seven-member task force comprised of three City Council members, a county supervisor and three community members reviews the grant applications. Final approval of the expenditures must be approved by the full City Council and the county Board of Supervisors. It's a responsible oversight system that ensures community input yet protects against misuse of money.

Out of the process, \$175,000 was allocated for an "eco-academy," which would include job training for young residents and possibly windmill technology manufacturing. The money was given to Neighborhood House of North Richmond, a prominent nonprofit, to set up the program.

Bey and his followers insist the project was his idea and that the nonprofit should hire him to run the program. They threatened the executive director, Barbara Becnel, with harassment if she did not comply. Becnel, to her credit, refused to hire Bey and has returned the grant money rather than cave to the outrageous pressure.

The Rev. Kenneth Davis, a Bey supporter, admits he "threatened her with exposure."

"All we're looking for (Becnel) to do is be the fiscal agent and sign the checks on over: You get the money, you sign the check, you can take 2 percent off the top and we run the program," Davis said.

What?!

It gets more offensive. Davis leveled racist accusations against Supervisor John Gioia, who is a member of the task force overseeing expenditures. Davis says the county supervisor "is accustomed to having a doggone plantation that he can control." One might disagree with Gioia

on matters of policy, but the four-term supervisor has fought hard for poor communities in West County.

If Bey -- who, by the way, does not live in North Richmond -- wants a job, he should get in line with everyone else. He should also understand that bullying people does not win them over. From what we've seen, we wouldn't hire him, nor give him public money.