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A New Low for Corporate Hucksterism

By CHARLENE LAVOIE and MARY-KATE SMITH

Corporations have found another way to burden us with their massive power, influence and avarice. Not yet satisfied with record-breaking profits, corporate hucksters want to co-opt our community police departments and turn them into moneymaking pawns to facilitate the corporate bottom line. In the guise of "helping the community," corporations have found new ways to hawk their products.

It's bad enough that corporations are now securely embedded in the public schools. Corporations rent space from schools for soda and junk food machines that advertise Coke, Pepsi, Snickers and Doritos to children while getting an early hook into the younger generation. It's not rocket science to deduce a reason for the increase in hyperactivity and attention disorders in children.

The newest corporate scam takes the form of seducing communities with the promise of new equipment. In December 2002, the Bristol Chief of Police and the Board of Commissioners endorsed a program offered by a company called Government Acquisitions LLC. Government Acquisitions offered to lease new, fully equipped police vehicles to Bristol for $1 a year for three years. What's the catch? The company puts ads (not alcohol, tobacco and firearms) on the cruisers and retains authority over the type and location of the ads.

Cutbacks and deficits in state funding have resulted in increased reliance on local property taxes. Financial support for police departments is a concern and at least 100 towns across the nation have committed to Government Acquisitions in the hope of getting a good deal. After all, we are already inundated by ads, what's the harm of a few more? Government Acquisitions touts itself as patriotic– it is merely helping localities find funds for homeland security.

But educated consumers know you don't get something for nothing. Communities are concerned about the legality of the contract that requires taxpayers to pay all the fees associated with any disagreements between the town and the company. More to the point, the contract requires the town to assume responsibility for any liability associated with the vehicle and to hold the company and its advertisers harmless from any and all claims arising out of the vehicle. If any accidents occur, the agreement requires the town to assume full responsibility. The contract also requires the town to file any suits in North Carolina, even if, say, the town is located in Ohio or Alaska.

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Yet, this is an issue that goes beyond questions of law. It is really a matter of civic pride. Imagine our police officers driving cars with Big Macs on them or Wal-Mart Logos and "We sell for less." The question is one of appropriateness. Turning police cars into roving billboards is degrading to our police officers, demeaning to our civil society and a capitulation to corporate avarice.

The city of Bristol agreed and turned down the proposal in February. Only one city council member thought the program was a good idea, while the others believed it would lessen the integrity of the police department as well as diminish city pride.

In New Jersey, state lawmakers have taken it a step further. In January, the state assembly unanimously passed a bill that would prohibit ads on county and municipal police, first aid and fire vehicles. The New Jersey chiefs of police concluded that the ads would denigrate the public's respect for their law enforcement officers.

There are other ways to solve our funding problems. Since the Bristol City Council rejected the proposal, the police chief has applied for grants from the state and federal government that would cover a substantial amount of the cost for some new vehicles.

Local police departments depend on sufficient equipment, vehicles, and easily identifiable markers to effect quality law enforcement. Towns and cities should carefully examine the impact of advertising on their law enforcement vehicles including damage to the stature, integrity and moral authority of police officers and, by extension, the town. If a deal is too good to be true, it probably isn't.

Before Government Acquisitions comes to your town, inform yourself and speak out! An analysis of the contract by the Office of the Community Lawyer, as well as the contract itself, can be read at www.commercialalert.org. The Bristol Press published a series of articles on this topic that can be found at www.bristolpress.com.

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