

Club doing 'good work'

By CHANTAL M. LOVELL, Staff Writer
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REDLANDS - The Boys & Girls Clubs of Redlands may be taking criticism from a San Bernardino city councilman, but club organizers maintain their presence is good for San Bernardino.

In a two-page written statement, Councilman Rikke Van Johnson, who represents San Bernardino's 6th Ward, expressed his objections to the fact that the Redlands club is operating a site in Waterman Gardens, a San Bernardino public housing complex.

According to the complaint, Johnson believes the Redlands branch should stay in its own city, Loma Linda and Mentone. He views the involvement in San Bernardino as a "weasel move" to raise the amount of low-income children in its program as a means to qualify for more grants.

"This is nothing but exploitation in its worst form," wrote Johnson, who is also the president of the Boys & Girls Clubs of San Bernardino.

The Boys & Girls Clubs of Redlands has been serving low-income children for years and is only trying to meet a need, said P.T. McEwen, CEO of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Redlands.

The Boys & Girls Clubs of Redlands was informally approached by a housing authority official more than four years ago and asked if the clubs would be interested in taking over after-school programs in the area of Waterman Gardens, McEwen said.

"When the bid came out, we said `you know what? There's a lot of need at the Waterman Gardens,'" McEwen said.

"So, we bid on it just like everyone else and were awarded the contract. The contract was executed in late 2008. We opened a year ago Jan. 20."

He maintains that Redlands has every right to work in the area, as the San Bernardino Housing Authority legally awarded his branch control of the site.

Since opening, the club has been serving around 150 low-income children between the ages of 6 and 13, club officials said.

"We offer Boys & Girls Club after-school programs," said Roberto Martinez, Waterman Gardens Club site director. "Since we received Waterman Gardens, the attendance in after-school programs has increased, so we're helping more kids."

The site offers homework help, physical education activities, arts and crafts projects, music lessons, field trips, and lessons in self-confidence. It has 140 kids enrolled, sees about 40 daily, and about 100 each month, Martinez said.

"We really focus on helping them with self-esteem and confidence," Martinez said. "You can really see them gain confidence after they've been coming for a while."

But Johnson is concerned that San Bernardino money given to the club is not being spent at the Waterman Gardens site. That is not the case, Redlands officials said.

"We are doing a good thing in San Bernardino," Martinez said. "The money is staying in San Bernardino, we're helping the kids in San Bernardino, we're hiring people from San Bernardino. We're doing good things for them."

Martinez said there are bigger things to worry about in the area.

"My concern would be that San Bernardino is low on a number of things, but one thing it's not low on is the number of kids who need an after-school program," Martinez said.

A Jan. 21 Daily Facts article contributed to this report.

E-mail Staff Writer Chantal M. Lovell at clovell@redlandsdailyfacts.com