

Town of Cicero spent \$500,000 on trinkets from board member's firm

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Rosemary Konz, an owner of You & Me, sits on a Town of Cicero board and is the daughter of Town Trustee Lorraine Walsh.

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Why did the Town of Cicero buy 250 rubber chickens?

Or more than 200,000 pens, pencils and highlighters since 2005 when Town President Larry Dominick took office?

Or more than 9,500 backscratchers?

Or 6,000 custom balloons with the name and phone number of the Town of Cicero Rodent Control Department — just a portion of the more than 30,000 custom balloons it bought?

Not to mention the 1,200 beach balls with the same rodent information, out of a total of 11,200 beach balls that the town has

purchased.

Those are just some of the hundreds of thousands of promotional items — many with Dominick's name on them — that the Town of Cicero gives away at its many events for seniors, school kids and residents.

"We use them as promotional materials to promote the Town of Cicero," said town spokesman Ray Hanania. "The public loves the items." Some of the items go to town children as free school supplies.

The town buys hundreds of thousands of items, without going out to bid for the best price, from a business based in Downers Grove called You & Me that is owned by Rosemary Konz, a member of a Town of Cicero board.

Konz also happens to be the daughter of Town Trustee Lorraine Walsh.

Not that you would know that from the statement of economic interest that Konz files with the county as required by law.

Konz files the annual statement because she sits on a town board, advising city officials on town real estate development. But in her filing, Konz does not disclose that You & Me does business with the town, even though the form specifically asks about such ties, records show.

Under Dominick's administration since 2005, Cicero has spent nearly \$600,000 on the promotional items, according to town records. Dominick was elected in 2005 in part on a campaign to end nepotism in town.

Hundreds of thousands of the items bear the Town of Cicero's name on them — often along with Dominick's.

Some have a replica of Dominick's signature.

Others tell residents the item comes courtesy of Larry Dominick.

Still others wish a happy holiday — from Larry Dominick.

From You & Me, the town has bought everything from brass-lacquered holiday ornaments to lint rollers to pill boxes to hand sanitizers.

The town also has bought "U.S.A." coffee cups (made in China), rulers, stuffed animals, even ice cream scoops.

About 4,000 ice cream scoops, in fact, with the motto "To get the scoop ... Go to www.TheTownofCicero.com, Town President, Larry Dominick," according to a town invoice reviewed by the Chicago Sun-Times.

The 5,000 mouse pads the town bought from You & Me has the town's website on it as well. Plus Dominick's name.

If residents need to take care of their appearances, the town has got it covered. Dominick's administration bought more than 4,000 sticks of lip balm and more than 5,000 nail files.

The town also relies on You & Me for some lighter material. Cicero purchased the 250 rubber chickens in 2008 from You & Me to hand out to children who attended an event the town cosponsored to salute the achievements of local television personality Son of Svengoolie, whose use of rubber chickens in his act is well known.

Hanania, the town spokesman, says many of the items it buys are for children. There is nothing wrong with many of the items having Dominick's name on them, Hanania argued.

"It is appropriate to list Town President Larry Dominick and the Town of Cicero on all items purchased by the Town of Cicero," Hanania said.

Dominick appointed Konz to the town's Housing and Real Estate Board in 2006, the year after he was first elected president.

She gets paid \$9,000 a year for her board service and gets free health insurance from the town for herself and her husband. The town has said it pays people to sit on boards to encourage service from town residents. Konz does not live in Cicero, and Dominick has put many family members and political allies on the town boards.

Konz started the company, You & Me Inc., along with her husband, in 1998, according to the firm's website.

Hanania said the company has done business with the Town of Cicero since the same year the company started — well before Dominick got into office, and that Dominick simply kept using a company that had served the village well.

Konz and her mother, Walsh, the town trustee, are active supporters of Dominick. Konz did not return a phone message Friday. Walsh could not be reached.

Hanania said there is no conflict of interest with the town buying items from a company owned by a town board member who is the daughter of a town trustee.

He drew a distinction between town trustees and officials and someone who is paid to be on a town board.

“Simply being related to someone does not ensure you get a contract nor does it mean you will not get a contract,” Hanania said. “I also don’t think that people who are working for the best interests of the town should be punished or excluded from doing business with the town as long as that business is discussed openly and in public at town board meetings.”

You & Me has donated more than \$6,000 in cash or merchandise to Larry Dominick’s campaigns for town president or to his political allies.

Walsh was accused in a court affidavit filed in a civil case earlier this year of using threats to stir support for Dominick in her role as town trustee.

Former town employee Tony DeLeon in the affidavit wrote that Walsh threatened his son, another Cicero worker, that he could lose his job if he didn’t contribute to Dominick’s campaign.

“Every year, I was told by Town of Cicero Trustee Lorraine Walsh that I should politically and financially support Larry Dominick and his political organization, the Cicero Voters Alliance,” DeLeon wrote in his affidavit.

The fortunes of You & Me in Cicero has steadily improved over the years.

In 2001, Konz and her husband filed for bankruptcy.

“The business has yet to turn a profit,” they noted in the filing, referring to You & Me.

Konz’s mother, Walsh, is a former ally of convicted Cicero Town President Betty Loren-Maltese, and she was appointed to the Cicero Town Board as a trustee in 2002.

From 2002 to 2005, before Dominick took office, Walsh’s daughter’s company took in about \$57,000 total.

After Dominick took office through this year so far, You & Me did better, getting more than \$580,000, town records show.

Excerpted from *Town of Cicero spent \$500,000 on trinkets from board member’s firm* - Chicago Sun-Times

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