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## Boys & Girls Club a worthy investment

Few nonprofit organizations provide a better service to the young people in a community than the Boys & Girls Club.

Members of the Nashua club have achieved national recognition on a number of occasions, and the Boys & Girls Club of Souhegan Valley – with its new building and auditorium in Milford – is a genuine asset to that town as well as neighboring Amherst and Wilton.

Representatives of the Souhegan Valley club appeared before Milford selectmen recently to ask for some help from the town. To their credit, selectmen did not reject the request at hand.

Instead, they asked club officials to try more creative approaches to fundraising. Failing that, selectmen offered to consider increasing the \$1,000 appropriation for the club in the town's social service budget.

Milford could double that contribution and still get more than its money's worth. Amherst and Wilton should join in as well. The programs these clubs offer keep young children off the street and diminish the appeal of gangs, which according to Milford Police Chief Fred Douglas are a growing problem with the potential to create significant costs to the community.

Douglas appeared before selectmen recently to warn about the increasing threat of gang violence in Milford. The chief has organized a forum for today at 6 p.m. in the middle school to discuss the issue.

It wasn't long after Douglas appeared to issue his warning that Boys & Girls Club officials appeared to ask for more help.

Selectmen agreed that local kids are better off because of the club, but they were reluctant to recommend additional funding. The club in Milford is feeling the economic squeeze. The demand is there, as evidenced by growing membership, but federal funding is drying up and local contributions are down.

In the end, the club could have little choice but to raise the annual membership fee from a very modest \$40 to higher prices that would come closer to supporting the operating costs.

That would price many of the club's members out of the market, since many already come from families that are hard-pressed to make ends meet. The result, warned club President Alan Woolfson, would be more kids on the street to fuel the growing gang problem.

When Milford was governed by an annual town meeting, those in attendance could vote up or down on charitable requests and could have a direct say in whether tax dollars were used to support charitable organizations in the community.

Selectmen now have that role in Milford and are understandably reluctant to finance any endeavor outside the mandate of town government.

As Selectman Jim Dannis told the club spokesmen: "I've struggled to understand how the town can take taxpayers' money and transfer it to charitable organizations."

Towns in New England have a history of doing exactly that at town meeting. If club supporters are unsuccessful in their appeal to selectmen, they may be better served by taking their case directly to the voters in a petitioned warrant article.

In the meantime, selectmen should reconsider some of the club's requests for donated services, including a waiver on water and sewer fees, free pool passes or free snow plowing.

By donating only one of the three services requested, the town would more than double its current level of support to an agency that affects more than 600 impressionable youngsters, their families and the quality of life in the community.

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